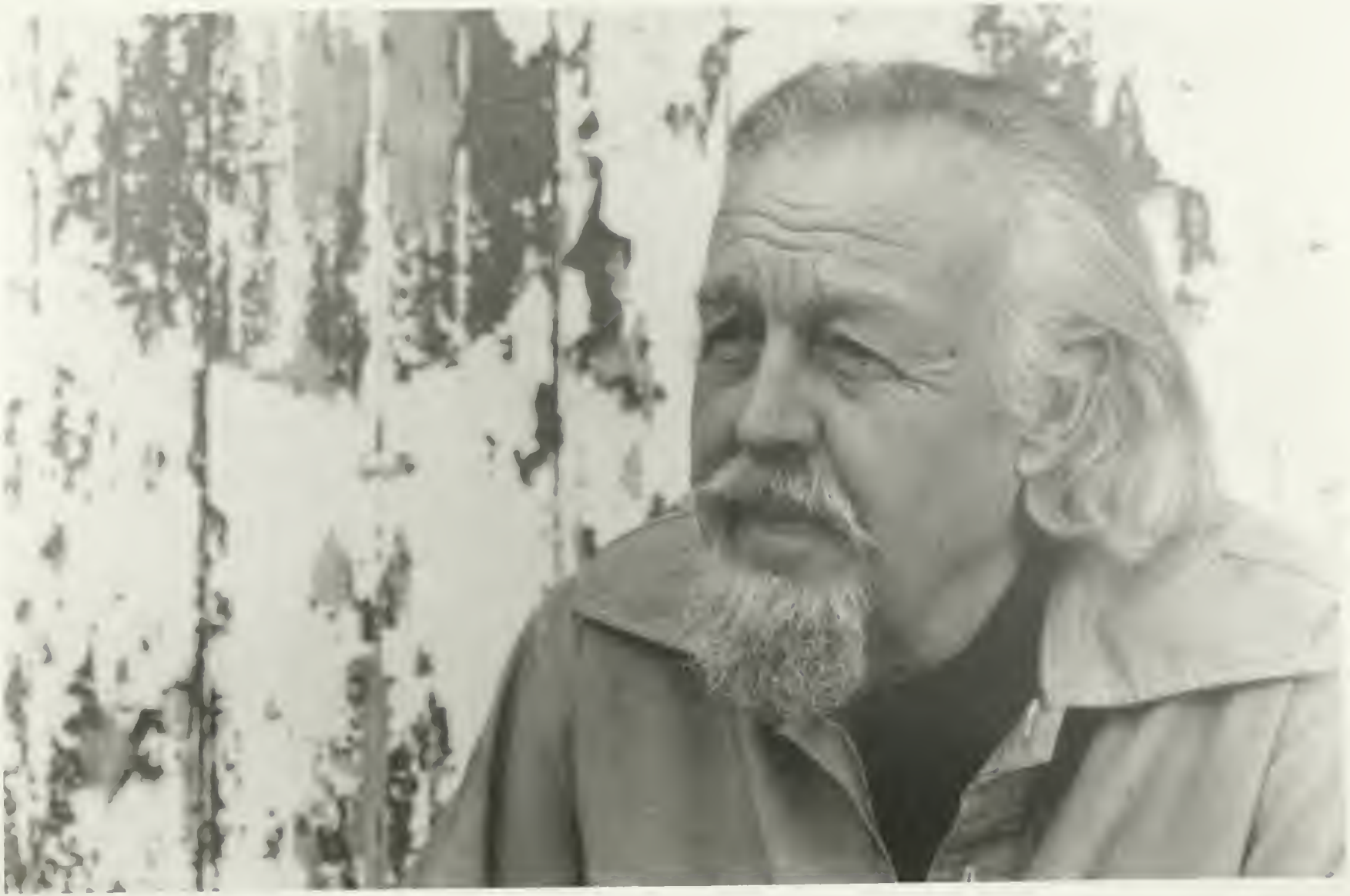


CALIFORNIA ASSEMBLAGE ART: GORDON WAGNER

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith

VOLUME I

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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None.

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Photograph by Katherine P. Smith.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: April 13, 1915, in Redondo Beach, California.

Education: Three years at UCLA; B.A. in engineering, University of California, Berkeley. One year at Chouinard Art Institute. Private instruction from Norman S. Chamberlain.

Spouses: Patricia Elliot Wagner, married 1942, two daughters; Virginia Copeland Wagner, married 1967.

CAREER HISTORY:

Tool and die maker, EMSCO Derrick Equipment Company, North American Aviation Company, 1934-42.

Tool design engineer, North American Aviation Company, Air Research, Hufford Machine Works, TRANSCO Products, Steven Douglass Company, Hughes Aircraft Company, Commercial Casting and Engineering Company, Duwes Engineering Company, Rocketdyne, 1942-58.

Full-time professional artist and art teacher, 1958-87.

GALLERY REPRESENTATION:

Willard Hougland Gallery, Hermosa Beach, California, 1930s-50s.

Hickson Gallery, Manhattan Beach, California, 1950s.

Foch Rayboff, Los Angeles, 1950s.

Cottonwood Verde Valley Art Association, Jerome, Arizona, 1950s.

Silvan Simone Gallery, Los Angeles, 1959-76.

Stables Gallery, Taos, New Mexico, 1960s and 1970s.

Robert Comara Gallery, Los Angeles, 1968-74.

Lee Nordness Galleries, New York, 1969-72.

Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles, 1970s.

Vorpal Gallery, San Francisco and New York, 1976-79.

PERIODS OF WORK (as prepared by Wagner):

Amusement zone paintings and drawings, 1920s and 1930s.

Big Sur and Marine paintings, 1940s.

Barrington series, paintings, 1946-50.

Light machines and mobiles, 1946-50.

First assemblages, 1948-50.

Jerome, Arizona, paintings and drawings, 1950.

Navaho paintings, 1950-53.

Piece of Pieces from the Sea series and other assemblages, 1950-59.

Topanga paintings, 1953-59.

Spider web paintings, 1954.

Amusement zone paintings, 1954-55.

Indian sky paintings, 1955.

Large assemblages, 1959-66.

Mexico paintings and assemblages, 1960-65.

Prayer and love objects, 1966-69.

Psychedelic art, 1967-69.

Snatches from the Underground, collages, 1968.

Box assemblages (with found objects), 1968-72.

Memories of the Future, lithograph series, 1969-72.

Under the Crown series, drawings, 1972-74.

Minidramas and Microcomedies (fabricated boxes), 1973-74.

Shadow and dream boxes, 1975-78.

"The Fool," playing card series of paintings and boxes, (The Suit of Squares, The Suit of Circles, The Suit of Keyholes), 1979-80.

Belgian boxes, 1979-80.

Pun boxes, 1980-84.

The Interior Castle, construction, 1981-82.

"The Fool" playing card castle (The Suit of Pluses), construction, 1983-84.

Marine series, boxes, 1982-87.

Whiskey Marine series, assemblages, 1984-87.

Firaskew, construction, 1985-87.

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:

South Bay Art Gallery, Hermosa Beach, California, 1949.

Willard Hougland Gallery, Hermosa Beach, California, 1949, 1952.

Graywood Gallery, Los Angeles, 1950.

Blue Pelican Art Gallery, Pacific Grove, California, 1951.

Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona, 1953.

Lucy Bayne Gallery, Los Angeles, 1955.

Dibbs Gallery, Pacific Palisades, California, 1956.

Now Gallery, Los Angeles, 1956.

Pumpkin Hollow Art Gallery, Calabasas, California, 1958.

Silvan Simone Gallery, Los Angeles, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1975.

Kings Art Gallery, Los Angeles, 1959.

Barnsdall Art Gallery, Los Angeles, 1959.

Verde Valley Art Gallery, Jerome, Arizona, 1961.

Brooks Foundation, Santa Barbara, California, 1966.

Bay Cities Jewish Community Center, Santa Monica, California, 1967.

Mystic Arts World, Laguna Beach, California, 1968.

Robert Comara Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969, 1971.

Long Beach Museum of Art, 1969.

Stables Gallery, Taos, New Mexico, 1970, 1974.

Dwight Bohme Gallery, Palomar College, San Marcos, California, 1971.

Konstsalongen Kavalletin, Uppsala, Sweden, 1971.

Södertälje Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden, 1972.

Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1973.

Galerij Kaleidoscoop, Gent, Belgium, 1973.

Galérie l'Angle-Aigu, Brussels, Belgium, 1973.

Nederland Amerika Instituut, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1973.

Israel Galerij, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1973.

Archer Gallery, London, England, 1974.

Gallery of Contemporary Art, Taos, New Mexico, 1975.

Aspen Gallery of Art, Aspen, Colorado, 1975.

Chatterton's Book Shop, Los Angeles, 1976.

California State University, Long Beach, Gallery, 1976.

Santa Barbara City College Art Gallery, 1976.

Chelsea Gallery, Venice, California, 1977.

Vorpal Gallery, New York, 1977; San Francisco, 1979.

Architektenhuis, Gent, Belgium, 1978.

Open Gallery, Eugene, Oregon, 1978.

Downey Museum of Art, Downey, California, 1979.

Artemis Galerij, Gent, Belgium, 1979.

California State University, Fresno, 1980.

Leopold Gold Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1981.

Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, California, 1983, 1986.

Edge Gallery, Fullerton, California, 1986.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

Pasadena Museum of Art, 1950, 1961.

Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art, 1953, 1956, 1960.

California State Fair, 1956, 1959, 1960.

Corcoran Gallery Biennial, Washington, D.C., 1957, 1961.

American Federation of the Arts, New York, 1958.

Denver Museum of Art, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962.

Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1959.

La Jolla Art Center, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1963.

M.H. De Young Museum of Art, San Francisco, 1962.

Long Beach Museum of Art, 1963; "Mixed Emotions," 1970.

San Fernando Valley State College, "Assemblage 2-3," 1964.

Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, "Los Angeles Sculpture '65," 1965.

University of California, Los Angeles, Art Gallery, "Sixty-six Signs in Neon," 1966.

Brooks Foundation, Santa Barbara, California, "Kinetics in Art," 1967.

University of New Mexico Art Gallery, "Watercolor Today," 1971.

United States Embassy, London, England, 1972.

Prudhoe Gallery, London, England, 1972.

National Academy of Design, New York, 1972.

Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin, "The Small Environment," 1972.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Assemblage," 1974.

Los Angeles Institute for Contemporary Art, "Assemblage and Collage," 1975, "Imagination," 1976.

Anhalt Gallery, Los Angeles, "Combining Surrealism," 1977.

Image and the Myth Gallery, Los Angeles, "Quarterdeck," 1977 (Wagner curated show).

Mount San Antonio College Art Gallery, "Four Fantastic Imagists," 1978.

ARCO Center for the Visual Arts, Los Angeles, "Eccentric L.A. Art," 1978.

Anhalt-Barnes Gallery, Los Angeles, "Boxes," 1978.

Philadelphia Art Alliance, "Art in Boxes," 1979.

Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, "Keramic Mail," 1979.

University of Connecticut Art Gallery, "Mystery Boxes," 1979.

Artemis Galerij, Gent, Belgium, "Homage à Breton," 1980.

1111 Gallery, San Francisco, "I, Mannequin," 1980.

University of California, Riverside, Art Gallery, "3-D Imagery," 1983.

Pacific Grove Art Center, Pacific Grove, California, "Magic of Assemblage," 1983.

University of Southern California, Fisher Gallery, "Ceci N'Est Pas le Surréalisme: California Idioms of

Surrealism," 1984.

Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, California, "Return to the Narrative," 1984.

Koplin Gallery, Santa Monica, California, "Olympiad: Summer 1984," 1984.

Los Angeles Design Center, "Natural," 1984.

Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Ana, California, 1984.

Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, "Southern California Assemblage: Past and Present," 1986.

Barnsdall Junior Art Center, Los Angeles, "Toying Around," 1986 (Wagner curated show).

James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica, California, "Lost and Found in California: Four Decades of Assemblage Art," 1988.

TEACHING POSITIONS:

Valley Center of the Arts, Encino, California, 1956-59.

Palos Verdes Community Arts Center, 1958-60, 1973-77, 1981-82.

Barnsdall Art Center, Los Angeles, 1960-68, 1984-87.

Rustic Canyon Art Center, Santa Monica, California, 1960-68.

Los Feliz Jewish Community Center, Los Angeles, 1964-65.

Laguna Beach School of Art and Design, 1968-69.

University of Judaism, Los Angeles, 1970.

Pitzer College, Claremont, California, 1970.

Taos Art Association, Taos, New Mexico, 1972.

Camden Art Center, London, England, 1972-73.

Everywoman's Village, Los Angeles, 1975-78.

Kerns Art Center, Eugene, Oregon, 1978.

Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, California, 1982-87.

BOOKS:

Memories of the Future. Limited edition lithograph series, Los Angeles: Stone Publication, 1972; trade edition, San Pedro: Angel's Gate Press, 1979.

Tentacles of Progress. Pasadena: Angel's Gate Press, 1982.

The Castle of the Seven Dwelling Places, with Virginia Wagner. Pasadena: Castle Press, 1982.

FILMS:

Poster, Bailey Films, 1969.

Gordon Wagner Loves You, FilmFair, 1972.

AFFILIATIONS:

Artists Equity, 1940s.

America Needs Indians, c. 1967-70.

Dreamworks, An Interdisciplinary Quarterly, advisory board, 1981-87.

Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, California, board of directors, 1986-87.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Richard Cándida Smith, principal editor, Oral History Program, UCLA. B.A., Theater Arts, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Tapes I-II, VII-XIV, Wagner's studio in his home in Pasadena, California; Tape III, the home of Tony Portillo in San Pedro, California; Tapes IV-V, the gallery at Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, California, where a retrospective exhibition covering fifty years of Wagner's work was on display; Tape VI, the Edge Gallery, Fullerton, California, where an exhibition of recently completed assemblages was on display.

Dates: April 19, May 17, August 22, 1986; January 10, 18, February 7, 14, 21, 28, March 7, 21, 23, 1987.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of hours recorded: All sessions were held in the morning. Most sessions were concluded after ninety minutes. A total of 17 hours, 45 minutes, was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Wagner and Smith.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

Smith prepared for the interview by examining Wagner's personal papers, including a clipping file and several volumes of diaries. Smith discussed Wagner's career with several artists and gallery directors. The primary focus of the interview was the evolution of the California assemblage movement.

EDITING:

Jacqueline Wester, assistant editor, edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Wagner reviewed the edited transcript in September 1987. He made minor corrections and checked the

spellings of the many persons mentioned in the course of the interview.

Wester prepared the table of contents. Lisa Magee White, editorial assistant, prepared the index. The interviewer prepared the biographical summary and the interview history.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

APRIL 19, 1986

SMITH: We normally begin these kinds of interviews by asking when and where were you born.

WAGNER: I was born April 13, 1915, in Redondo Beach, California.

SMITH: Who were your parents and what did they do?

WAGNER: My father was--his name was Jay Spoor Wagner and he was sort of a sales manager at the end of his life for the EMSCO Derrick Equipment Company, oil-well-drilling-machinery company in Los Angeles. He'd always been in that sort of business and he went back to the National Supply and Union Tool when he first came to California from New York. He was born in Holland, but he moved to Schenectady, where he worked in the American Locomotive Works building railroad locomotives. They moved to Redondo, I think, in 1898. My mother, her name was Genevieve [Wagner]. She was French and was from Schenectady also, where she lived. Her father was a locomotive engineer on the Delaware and Hudson line, and he was killed on an open switch and left my grandmother with about four or five children at that time. She was just a housewife; she always took care of things at home. She never worked for anyone that I know of; maybe before I was born she worked, but I wasn't aware of it.

SMITH: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

WAGNER: I had a brother by the name of Murrel. He died when he was about eight years old, when I was young.

SMITH: How did your parents come to live in Redondo Beach?

WAGNER: Well, my grandmother moved to Redondo Beach from New York, and she got a job--her name was Anna [Austin Wagner]--she got a job working for the O. T. Johnson Foundation, which was an apartment house in Los Angeles for widowed mothers with children, who were working. This was sort of a foundation to take care of the children and give the mothers reasonable rent while they worked. This was down around Loma Drive and Beverly [Boulevard] and Third Street; the building is still there. It is no longer the Johnson apartments. It was a huge complex. I think there were probably about two hundred women and their children who lived there, and they had their own school and playground. It was near Belmont High School. She managed that all of her life until she died, and she died at ninety-seven years old.

SMITH: You lived right near the beach?

WAGNER: I lived right on the beach. I lived on the Esplanade in Redondo, about two blocks from the pier. At that time, there were several piers in Redondo; when I was born there were a lot of old piers, lumber piers. Mostly sailing schooners at that time came-- There was a huge

railroad traffic there also in Redondo with the Pacific Electric Railway. After all, it was Mr. [Henry] Huntington who put Redondo Beach together, the amusement part of it, and he ran his PE Railway right down to the beach there to Paseo del Mar, right out to the south beach and along the wharfs, where they could haul the lumber and other products that came from all over the world. Redondo was an exciting place to be. It was alive, it was full of wonderful seamen and people.

SMITH: Were you pretty free to just roam about the Esplanade and the beach?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: So you could go out your front steps--?

WAGNER: Oh, when I was about six years old, we moved. We moved out of Redondo; we moved to another part of the country called Athens-on-the-Hill.

SMITH: Which is where? Where is that?

WAGNER: Well, now it would be about 120th Street between Normandie [Avenue] and Figueroa [Street]--no, Broadway. Athens it was called. There was Athens-on-the-Hill and there was West Athens. My first year of school was in West Athens grammar school, where I went to the first grade. I didn't go to kindergarten because I don't think they had kindergarten when I was six years old. Athens then was out in the country, and it was developed by some millionaire

who decided he wanted to build Athens in Los Angeles, [laughter] so it was beautiful. It was a gorgeous place to live. There were huge houses and sunken gardens and all of these replicas of that. It was always interesting to me that it was so Greek-oriented, because one of the gentlemen who sort of destroyed Athens was George F. Getty, who was [J.] Paul Getty's father. But in drilling oil wells right in the center of the sunken garden-- He drilled the deepest oil well that had been drilled at that time, several thousand feet down. It's always been sort of interesting that Getty built this museum around the Greek culture, all the fanciness of it; George F. Getty was destroying it on the other side, so it's often made me wonder. George F. Getty and C. C. Julian and the Barnsdall Oil Company and E. J. Miley and all of these companies started when the wildcat well came in. Well, naturally, that got the whole oil field in Athens and from then on it became very, very run-down and destructive.

SMITH: Was that happening while you were living there?

WAGNER: Yeah. It had started.

SMITH: Then did your parents move back to Redondo?

WAGNER: No, Hermosa [Beach].

SMITH: Hermosa.

WAGNER: Yeah. My first year of school was at Athens, and the people were nice in Athens. I still remember most of

them by name. It was a community; the houses were like maybe half a block apart, big houses and roads that went down. I drove through Athens just recently, maybe a year ago, and most of the houses that are still there were there in those days, and not much [has been] added. It's still open fields. There was a street there called Laconia, and now I think they call it Athens Boulevard. But if you take the Harbor Freeway and you get off at about 120th, it's just south of Imperial [Boulevard]. It's up on the top of the hill, the highest point before you start down into Gardena as you climb and you'll find it there. Drive there sometime and enjoy it for yourself because it still has some of the old nostalgia in it. There were a lot of people there that did things, like Woodward Bennett Packing Company, they lived there, and the Watkinses of Watkins Products; you know, a lot of people like that had their homes [there]. I loved it there because I'd never been in land like that. We had our own gardens and we raised string beans, I remember, and I used to go around and sell string beans to all of the people in the neighborhood for, I think it was, ten cents a pound.

SMITH: You had a painting exhibit when you were nine years old, I understand.

WAGNER: Yes.

SMITH: At a pool hall. How did that happen?

WAGNER: Well, I can never really begin to tell you when I started being interested in being an artist because I don't remember how old I was when I began, but all of my life I was intrigued by looking at pictures and paintings and copying them, trying to do sunsets or trying to get the light and silhouettes and things. And if I wasn't doing that I was building something. My father had a workshop where I could--I was free to do anything I wanted to do. I remember one time we had to build something like the first crystal set radio, with a flour-box coil and a cat's whisker, and we all tuned in to listen to Uncle John's bedtime stories--

SMITH: With earphones?

WAGNER: --on KHJ. Yeah, headphones. My father rigged it up so we could have three headphones for us all to listen to KHJ. It was probably one of the first radio stations, I think.

SMITH: Was your father an engineer or a salesman for an engineering company?

WAGNER: He was a salesman for an engineering company, but he knew how to draw, and he knew how to create things, and he knew how to build things. He was a very good craftsman from his background, and he enjoyed that sort of thing, making really beautiful furniture and things. I have a bookcase here that he built for me when I was about

eight. It's made out of solid mahogany.

SMITH: Was he strict? In terms of what he--

WAGNER: Strict?

SMITH: Strict, yeah, strict in terms of how he ran the house?

WAGNER: Not at all, he was just the opposite. He was far from strict. He was a very calm, together, beautiful-- Everybody loved him. They called him Jake. His name was Jay Spoor, but they called him Jake. They all loved Jake. He was a highly respected man in his work and even many years later, you know, after he had died, everybody said, "We'll never forget Jake. He was a man of real ideals and a beautiful man, and I hope you can be like that. If you could be like Jake, then you'll be something," they said. "You've got to live up to a lot." Well, I enjoyed him because he let me build my own things. If I wanted something like a train or a toy or a ship, "Build it," he says. So I had to build all my own toys, all my own things, because [with] his Dutch background, he was quite thrifty when it came to those sorts of things. There's an old story that you can always tell a Dutch boat at sea because no birds follow it, and I think that's true of his thriftiness. He built his own house.

SMITH: The one in Hermosa or Redondo?

WAGNER: He designed it. No, the one we had in Athens, he built that one. Then he built one in Hermosa. He enjoyed building and working with architects and designing. He knew a lot. A calm man. I only saw him angry once.

SMITH: What was that about?

WAGNER: That was over his Model T Ford. It wouldn't start one morning. In those days the Model T Ford was a machine that had to be jacked up to where the hind wheels were off the ground and then you'd crank it up because there was so much grease in the transmission--planetary transmission--that it was too stiff to get it started by the starter so you had to get the wheels off the ground. Well, he's cranking and he's cranking, and he's out there and it won't start and it won't start. He looked at it for about two minutes and I saw him kick out both headlights [laughter] and he walked in the house. That's the only time I've ever seen him really angry.

SMITH: So you had an exhibit at a pool hall?

WAGNER: Yes. Well, that was when I was back down on the beach again. I was so fascinated by amusement zones, carnivals. The architecture of Redondo Beach, which was sort of a--I suppose you might call it transported to Redondo from Europe. The buildings all looked European, all of the finials and the windows and the light and the color, and it was like gaiety, a place of gaiety and joy,

like the old piers used to be in England and France where they built them that way, to give that feeling. Coney Island, Luna Park, all this mystery and fantasy and humor, and a certain elegance at the same time. Well, I was fascinated by those symbols and all that imagery and so I started painting about those things. I started painting about roller coasters and amusement piers and carnivals and merry-go-rounds and that sort of thing. I met an old painter from Hermosa; he liked me.

SMITH: Who was that?

WAGNER: That was Norman [S.] Chamberlain. I met him one time when he saw me painting outside--

SMITH: Were you painting in oils or watercolors?

WAGNER: Those were oils. And he liked them.

SMITH: So your parents went out and bought you the oils and the brushes and the canvas that you needed to do it?

WAGNER: Sure. Whatever I needed. There weren't too many art supplies in those days because there weren't very many people interested in art. California was a cultural desert at that time and so they weren't the easiest things to find, but you could send for them in New York and other places where the more civilized people lived. [laughter]

SMITH: So you met-- Norman Chamberlain saw you painting.

WAGNER: Yes. So he decided that I should have a show of my paintings one time. He knew this pool hall in Redondo,

and we hung them in the pool hall [laughter] when I was about nine.

SMITH: Did you get a review or anything?

WAGNER: No. They'd never heard of reviews in those days. Nobody got reviews. They didn't even have an art column in the paper in those times. Not in California.

SMITH: Southern California.

WAGNER: Yeah. California just wasn't-- California was just about the same then as it is now. It hasn't grown much. I mean, basically the population of Southern California is still the booze-and-cruise set, and athletics, and body movement. You don't find too many people really involved in the arts right now even; they were, maybe, in the sixties, but not now. It's changed again. It's going right back to where it was about the time of the early fifties.

SMITH: Well, a kid interested in art and living on the beach, all of your friends must be more interested in beach things. Who were your friends at that time? I mean, what did they think about what you were doing?

WAGNER: Well, none of my friends even hardly knew that I was painting. I couldn't talk to them about that. Only sissies painted, you know. That was not for men in those days. If you were a painter or an artist or a poet or something like that, they laughed at you in school.

Sissies. You had to be queer to be a painter, you know. You couldn't be a painter. They used to joke about me sometimes. The people that would know me when I'd be painting or something, they'd call me Rembrandt. I was kind of known--that was one of my nicknames. "Here comes Rembrandt." Because that's the only person they'd ever heard of. They'd never heard of any other painter in their lives. Probably from some film they'd seen or something they decided they should do that.

SMITH: You were orphaned pretty young.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: How old were you?

WAGNER: About twelve.

SMITH: About twelve. Both your parents died suddenly or--?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: And what happened? Did you go to live with your grandmother then?

WAGNER: No. No. No. I didn't want to bother my grandmother. She was very busy working away in her Johnson apartment house. I remember she was a lady who wore a lace collar and violet, lots of violet, purples. [laughter] A wonderful lady. Funny hats and very strong, like a ramrod. I remember one time she was so strong that she was threatened by Winnie Ruth Judd, the ax murderer who chopped up her husband in the trunk, the doctor. Winnie Ruth Judd

lived in this place and she came to her and said, "I'm going to kill you." And my grandmother says, "Put that thing down and get out of here." That's the kind of woman she was. So I just didn't want to bother her. In those days there were lots of people-- We didn't have that system they have nowadays where you're a throwaway or a castoff, a runaway. I wasn't a runaway. There are so many runaway kids now, it makes me look like an angel. I just lived by myself. I found this box like house under the pier, a skeleton for it, and I rigged it all up, and I had a ladder. I could sleep there, and I worked there.

SMITH: Did people know you were living there?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, sure.

SMITH: The authorities?

WAGNER: Well, what authorities? They didn't have many authorities in those days.

SMITH: The police?

WAGNER: It was a different kind of a world in those days, much tougher than it is now, you know. I mean, tougher, but yet more powerful, more honest. I didn't have any problem there. I was there about a year. I worked in the penny arcade, you see, I worked there.

SMITH: What were you doing?

WAGNER: I was making change and sweeping and cleaning up, and then sometimes I would work over in the merry-go-round,

putting the gold ring in for the prettiest girl in Loof's Hippodrome.

SMITH: Why didn't you just stay in your parents' house, though?

WAGNER: No, I didn't, no.

SMITH: No?

WAGNER: Because they didn't own that house at that time.

SMITH: Oh, I see.

WAGNER: This was a rented house they had.

SMITH: And your grandmother didn't come looking for you?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, well, I used to visit her sometimes, oh, yeah. I visited her, and she was my friend, and we liked each other. She died at ninety-seven, you know. She died probably about, I think, in 1952. She was a character. She'd hit a streetcar conductor over the head with her umbrella in downtown L.A. on Hill Street and told him he was an insolent man because he didn't stop for her. She caught the streetcar on the fly and cracked him over the head. That was about a year before she died. [She was] ninety-six, I think. She's buried out in Colton in a cemetery.

SMITH: You worked in the arcade and you lived under the pier?

WAGNER: Yeah. I didn't really **live** under the pier, I **existed** under the pier. I was out all the time. It was a

place where I could sleep.

SMITH: So you were up and down the beach and--

WAGNER: It was like-- It could happen in Pasadena. These guys build tin-can houses down here and they live in them, build fires out in the fields at night. I was like a street person, you know. That's all it amounts to. We've got millions of them now in L.A., don't we, that are running around. It's no big deal. We had street people in those days too.

SMITH: What was the beach community like then? What kind of people were your friends?

WAGNER: My beach friends were-- I don't think I had a happier time of my life than on the beach, because everybody knew everybody and it was really a joy being on the beach. I loved to body surf. I loved to skin-dive. I was a lifeguard. I loved to dance and I loved to paint. And I would work in between times on odd jobs wherever I could pick something up. Sometimes I'd work on a fishing boat or work on the amusement park or work as a lifeguard, or I'd do different things. But the people in general were all friendly. Everybody knew everybody and they used to-- It was like living in a town where everybody made jokes about people, and you were called by whatever they thought you should be called by, nicknames. There was Rusty Williams, Hound Dog Killam, and Wheezer Jay, and Cowboy

Jay, and Whiskey and Chaser Swallzman, all of these people, Goon Stevenson. My name was Rembrandt [laughs] or Shanks. My other name was Shanks because I was pretty tall and thin, and I guess I had long legs for my shorter body above so they called me Shanks. I played a lot of volleyball; I loved to play volleyball, and we had good teams. I played with a lot of people like old athletes that were UCLA fullbacks and USC [University of Southern California] fullbacks, I mean really good athletes. I played with all of those people, and they were all my friends. All my friends before that, when I was younger, I grew up with them all, we just grew up together. Our girlfriends were from the beach, most of them. We'd go to the dance, either the Mandarin Ballroom or the Hut, in Hermosa, where they had bands, like Benny Goodman, Gus Arnheim, Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, all the big bands, and we danced to all those people. It was a wonderful, wonderful life. It was relaxed. You knew about people. You could learn more about people living on the beach, probably, than you could learn anyplace else, because you saw all walks of life when they came to the beach. So you became tolerant of people, and you realized, "Well, where do they come from?" We all had a saying on the beach; the way we figured it out, anybody that lived east of the Pacific Coast Highway, there must be something wrong with

their head, because of the heat and the traffic and all those things. Of course, in those days, the Pacific Coast Highway wasn't called the Pacific Coast Highway, it was called Sepulveda [Boulevard], and there wasn't anything at all between the beach and Baldwin Hills. It was just all open fields and bean fields and the airport. Lincoln [Boulevard] was a drag strip for guys who built Model T's and Model A Fords and tried to race them on Sundays. The whole highway was open to them on Sunday to race, so it was a whole different thing. There wasn't any pressure, there wasn't any traffic, and everything behind Hermosa and Manhattan [Beach] was the country. Eucalyptus-tree-lined streets and roads and fields and farms. So there was no tension. And if you wanted to go to L.A., you didn't have to drive to L.A., you could take the streetcar right from your own town there, just get on and go right to downtown L.A. on the Pacific Electric Railway.

The actual people that I was involved with were either mostly water people, because I loved water, or we'd talk about art and painting and things of that nature, you know.

SMITH: Was George Freith there?

WAGNER: I was very young when George Freith dove off of the pier; he'd won the gold medal. He was supposed to be the world's greatest lifeguard. He won a gold medal in Japan for saving this whole group that were drowning from a

fishing boat and he pulled them all in, something like, I forget how many it was, something like sixty people or something. Imagine a man rescuing all those people by himself. So they gave him the gold medal of honor from Japan. He brought it back, and he was wearing it and it dropped off his neck through the planking on the pier, the Monstad Pier in Redondo, which is still there as a matter of fact. It's the pier that Rumsey's Concerts-by-the-Sea, the entrance is on that pier. He dropped it through the cracks, and it's about a 112 feet of water there. (They had to build extended pilings.) He got a huge rock and tied himself to this rock. He threw it over, and he went over with it and went to the bottom, and he came up with the medal in his teeth and all this blood flowing out of his eyes and nose and ears and mouth. But he got his medal back. That's the kind of grit George Freith had. He was the best in the lifeguards at that time.

SMITH: Did you know him when you were a lifeguard? He had already retired?

WAGNER: Oh, he'd died.

SMITH: Oh, he'd died.

WAGNER: Yeah, he was an older lifeguard, yeah.

SMITH: I understand you were also involved with bootlegging and rumrunning.

WAGNER: Well, that came when I had my lobster traps

between Rocky Point and Point Vicente in a place called Lunada Bay. I had about twenty traps out there and I worked there. One day I was approached by the rumrunners asking me if I would like to make some extra money by bringing the illegal whiskey through the surf onto the beach, and it would be unloaded and taken up the trail to the truck. And I thought about it for a while. They said, "You won't have to approach us. You're just out there. It just looks like you're doing your work." So I agreed to do it and I made some money that way. Very illegal. I hope this doesn't get reported to the police department; [laughter] they might come and get me.

I thought I'd like to say something about rumrunners. I was just reading in this book I have on tugs where the tugs usually tow the coal and wood and ice and all those things in the rivers and the Atlantic Ocean. During the rumrunner time, some rumrunners got ahold of a tug, and they took it out to the three-mile limit and emptied out the barrels of the cylinders. They had forty-eight-inch diameter pistons with a twelve-foot stroke, so it would be forty-eight times twelve feet; that's quite a bit of gallonage, right? Then they poured the rum into the pistons, and then they called the Coast Guard and said that they were in trouble, it was impossible for them to get this boat going, would they tow them to shore. So the

this boat going, would they tow them to shore. So the Coast Guard towed the tug with all this illegal rum right up to the dock. [laughter] I thought that was a funny story related to my experience. I love all those kinds of sea stories about tugs and ships.

SMITH: In the beach community was there a lot of trust? I mean, weren't there people who took advantage of others and preyed on the weaker people on the beach? I mean, you make it sound a little idyllic.

WAGNER: Well, basically, the people who lived on the beach all were like a community. There were a few undesirables around, yeah, but not like Venice. Venice was the opposite of Hermosa.

SMITH: Oh, even at the time?

WAGNER: Yeah. Venice was the Venice Gang. And the Peroons and the Ants. And if they went to Hermosa, or anybody went to Venice from Hermosa or Redondo, we were enemies.

SMITH: Who were in these gangs?

WAGNER: There was a Venice Gang.

SMITH: But who were in the gangs? Just any teenager?

WAGNER: The Venice Gang was full of all kinds of people I know. I know them well now. Some of them turned out to be lifeguards, some of them turned out to be Coast Guard captains, some are civic leaders; they all became

they just liked to start what they used to call "beefs." Liked to start "beefs," liked to fight on the pier. They would wait for a whole group to come so they could get into a fight with them. They just liked to disturb things. And they played very dirty. They'd circle somebody around. They were like the gangs today. The group, you know, they have power when they're in a gang. There's no difference. It's the same as the gangs today, just early gangs. They'd go down to the old sand dunes near Hyperion, where the sewer outlet is, you know?

SMITH: Near Playa del Rey?

WAGNER: South of Playa del Rey and north of El Segundo, there was-- Well, there's, what do they call it, some big plant there now [Hyperion Treatment Plant]. It's [Los Angeles City Department of] Water and Power or something, but in those days, that was all open sand dunes. You could go there any night of the week and build fires and have beach parties and slide down the dunes. Everybody went to the sand dunes for parties and weenie bakes and marshmallows and singing, but then right in the middle of the whole thing sometimes you'd get this gang and they would come and break it all up, you see. Well, we never did that in Hermosa. We didn't have a gang. San Pedro had a gang, too. So both sides of us, we had San Pedro over there and we had Venice on this side.

SMITH: Was that because Hermosa was a more affluent community?

WAGNER: Yeah. Because it was affluent. The people were more intelligent I think, or something, it seemed like it. A different kind of bringing up. A lot of people from Hermosa were from Pasadena at one time. There were a lot of actors who lived in Hermosa, and senators, and--

SMITH: I ask this because it seems a lot of your amusement park work is more scary than anything else, and your amusement zone pictures have a very frightening quality to them, a lot of them. Why is that?

WAGNER: Well, I think that the amusement zones, I think they should be scary because that gives you a fantasy that we're all children at heart. We all want to be scared, and we all want excitement, and we all want something to really happen besides just some straight, dull afternoon in a pretty little park. A lot of people like excitement, like to be scared. You look at a child square in the face and talk to him about some Mickey Mouse little thing or something, you can't get him interested. But if you go, "Ahhhhh!" he jumps around, and he loves you. All of a sudden he becomes your friend because you can be like him. And children, they see things from a whole different eye than we do. People who really love amusement piers, like myself, I saw it from the child's eye; even now I see

it from the child's eye when I'm grown up. I still see it through that excitement, that romance. Like old buildings like that, and old tug boats like I have here, and old things, old trains; I don't give a hoot about new trains. I can't even stand to look at them. But the old ones! And the old tug boats; not these streamlined things. And the old ships! There's a romance in them because they really were built with love, not production, not plastic, but with love. And all of these buildings were built with love. It might be scary to some, where for the other person it's like being in heaven.

But now, Hermosa Beach had no amusement zone whatsoever. That was in Redondo. Hermosa had one dance hall and a pier and the Lighthouse and a few things like that.

SMITH: An arcade? Did it have an arcade? A penny arcade?

WAGNER: No, not even a penny arcade. They weren't allowed in Hermosa.

SMITH: What were your favorite things that you liked about the amusement zone at Redondo? What were some rides or-- I guess they didn't have many rides, did they? It was more experiences.

WAGNER: Well, let's see, they had lots of rides. They had what you call Dodge 'Em bump cars--

SMITH: Oh, yeah, bumper cars.

WAGNER: And they had a roller coaster; and they had a lot of aerial apparatus, you know, spinning things; and they had a merry-go-round, which was a jewel. It was one of the old ones, really beautiful. It was a Belgian carousel.

SMITH: A carousel.

WAGNER: A real one. Loof's Hippodrome was the actual name of it, and it was out on the pier, as you started to go around on the horseshoe pier. It was a wonderful building: all this elegance, and all the design, and the cleanliness of the place; it sparkled. And then this great devil hanging on the wall with his mouth wide open where you threw the rings into the mouth of the devil, except the one who got the gold ring, then they got a free ride. The architecture was, like I say, pure, pristine, around the sea and the vistas and the skies. And looking through the windows, and the houses of mirrors, and the reflections, and the emotions and the joy of the people just like they'd been trapped in some kind of a cage. They come to the beach and they're let out, and they can go and they can have fun and express themselves and do whatever they want to do, and laugh, and hang upside down. They go into the crazy house--well, they had the Bug House in Redondo with a big windmill, they would just go insane in there. They'd get electric shocked and burned and bumped around, and they'd slide down rollers and the floor would drop.

SMITH: Burned how?

WAGNER: All these things that are so dangerous, you know, they even had signs saying, "Enter at your own risk," not responsible for any accidents that might occur while you're in this place. So they didn't even worry about those things in those days; nobody sued anybody. If you got a broken arm, well, that was your problem, or a cut finger or something. The other thing about it was these people would come down there, the men would come down all dressed up in their best suits and neckties and straw hats, and they'd go out on the beach. [laughter] It looked so funny to see all these black suits and shoes, and men in their straw sailor hats, you know? And the women in all their bustled gear and the dusters. And the children in full-piece bathing suits with swimming shoes.

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SMITH: We were talking about the amusement zones and the Bug House in particular, people getting burned, and I was wondering, what was--?

WAGNER: Well, they did. They got scratched and they got electric shocked. Because everything was pretty dangerous in those things at that time. There were rotating floors, and people would go into these places and then the floors would sink down; they had roller floors. If you touched the walls you'd get shocked. You were groping and grasping, and it would be all dark, and people stumbling over each other, but everybody was laughing. They were upside down and backwards, losing things, but there was still a certain-- That's what you might call scary! But people like to be scared, you know, they like that. They like roller coasters and they like-- They go on them for thrills, they don't go there for a pleasant afternoon of sitting in a contemplative position. They want to be scared, and if you think they're scary, maybe that's what they are.

SMITH: No, it's a different kind of scary, but we'll get into that later. You mentioned bodysurfing. Were people also surfboarding at that time? Did you do any surfboarding? Is that getting going?

WAGNER: Well, the first surfboarding was brought over here probably about 1935 or '34, around in there, by Duke Kahanamoku. He introduced it to a few Americans, like Tom Blake. It was basically being done down in Corona del Mar at the old jetty where the-- They have two jetties there now, but in the old days they had one, and the long, long waves from the bell buoy all the way up to the jetty. The surf rolled beautifully. There were no crashing waves. They just feathered all the time. Beautiful bodysurfing waves, too. And then it started. They had the old, hollow plank boards, and they built them like airplane compartments, with ribs and things, and you had a cork on the front with a hole to drain off the water. They usually took on a little water, so you tipped them up and drained that out when you got through surfing. Some of the early surfers were people like Spud Mormon, and Tule Clark, and Pickles Perrine, and Jim Bailey, Leroy Granis, Hoppy Schwartz, and Al Bixler. They surfed in the cove in Palos Verdes, in Bluff Cove, where the waves were really good in those days. In fact, the road was made and goes down all hewn out of the rock to carry the boards down. They cut out the reef so they could make their entrance out to the waves, yeah. Well, surfing really started about then. But bodysurfing was going ever since I can remember. I learned to bodysurf I think before--I don't even remember when I

started to bodysurf.

SMITH: You lived on your own for a year and then, I guess-- What happened then?

WAGNER: Well--

SMITH: Where did you go after you lived under the pier?

WAGNER: Well, Norm Chamberlain kind of--my old painter friend--he kind of took me in up in Hermosa and I lived in his place for a while. He had a nice studio and I could paint there and work there. I learned a lot from that man. He was really a cubist, I guess you might call him. He was influenced by [Pablo] Picasso, who he'd worked with, and he was influenced by [Georges] Braque. He could paint a very Frenchy painting, and he was good at that. He was also a good muralist; I remember that he did the Huntington Park post office mural.

SMITH: Did you work on that?

WAGNER: I ground the paint.

SMITH: You would grind the paint?

WAGNER: That's all. In the WPA [Works Progress Administration].

SMITH: So he lived in Hermosa Beach, and he had extra room and took you in?

WAGNER: He just had his studio there.

SMITH: Did he become your legal guardian?

WAGNER: Well, you might call him that, yeah. He was a

guardian angel, really, I think. He was so good to me and he really liked me and my work, and he was always helping me and encouraging me and praising me.

SMITH: Were you going to school during this period? I mean, after your parents died, did you continue in school?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, I kept going to school. I went to Redondo [Union] High [School]. I went to Hermosa first, to elementary school on the pier. That's where it used to be, right on the pier. That became a library; it's gone now, there's nothing there. We used to go bodysurfing right out of the schoolroom. We never wore shoes; we had a good life there.

But Norman was always helping me, and I'd get odd jobs. I'd work on fishing boats a little bit, mackerel boats or something. They needed somebody here, tenders or something. I was very good around the water and I liked the water. I was basically a water rat. I wasn't a Water Rat, because that was an organization in Manhattan Beach called the Water Rats.

SMITH: So how long did you live with Chamberlain?

WAGNER: Oh, I'd say maybe a couple of years.

SMITH: So until you were fourteen, fifteen?

WAGNER: Yeah, around there sometime.

SMITH: Then what happened?

WAGNER: Well, he took me places. We used to go off to

Taos, New Mexico. He was a great lover of Taos, and we'd go up there and stay there at Mabel Dodge's [Luhan] foundation, where she had all these artists like [Charles] Berninghaus and [Ernest] Blumenschein and [John] Sloan and [George] Bellows. They would all come and stay there. Walter Ufer. We would try and make her happy, like serenade her or something.

SMITH: Were you the only kid that was--

WAGNER: What?

SMITH: Were you the only teenager who was--

WAGNER: The only young one?

SMITH: Yeah, the only young one.

WAGNER: Oh, there were a couple of others around, oh yeah. Yeah, there were others.

SMITH: It would seem kind of boring to me for a young kid to go off to these places where a bunch of older people are hanging out and talking.

WAGNER: No, because I was older than them, basically. Older than my contemporaries, because they were still fooling around with things and I liked painting and they didn't have that going at all. So I was kind of inside of myself when it came to that, more inside than outside. But that didn't seem boring to me at all because there were lots of Indians, and excitement, and mountains. Wherever I went in my life, it doesn't matter if I was two years old

or now, I still feel romantically about things. If I don't feel romantically, I reject them completely. I don't want to have anything to do with them. They're just plastic dribble. So I was always recreating where I'd been when I was young. I went to some guy's house out in the country, some gentleman [who] had a nice farm or cabins and waterwheels. I'd come back and I'd reconstruct this thing, you know. When I was real young. I'd build the whole place.

SMITH: And then Chamberlain took you to Europe?

WAGNER: He took me to France one time, to Paris, and introduced me to Picasso and [Maurice de] Vlaminck and a few of these people. I met a few other surrealists there also. I really enjoyed surrealism more than I did cubism or impressionism, because it was more-- All these things where I came from were surreal, and I didn't know what to call it, where it came from, you know, but I really enjoyed that part of it, the mystical side and the-- Not only the mystical, but the fantasy and the nonsense and the humor, and the juxtaposition of dissimilar things related to one another. So that's when I sort of started looking into people like [Salvador] Dali and Max Ernst and Man Ray and [Marcel] Duchamp and people like that, more than I would with identifying with Picasso or Braque or the cubists.

SMITH: But you spent some time-- Chamberlain's influence

was the cubist because that was his generation.

WAGNER: Yeah, well, he was influenced-- His paintings were that way. He was more a cubist, but he didn't put that on to me.

SMITH: Some of your paintings from the forties, late forties and the fifties, are not classic cubism, but they have a cubist feel to them.

WAGNER: Yeah, they do; yeah, they do. Some of them. I would say so. Especially some I did of kites and of tide pools, where I've overlayed the movement of things and the kinetics of something moving around the point, yeah. And the transparencies through those. Yeah, they were from his influence, I'd say.

SMITH: From Chamberlain's influence or from the European?

WAGNER: No, I think it came basically from Chamberlain's influence in the beginning. A pile-up of stuff. He always said, "Gordon," he says, "I don't know how you do it, but you seem to be able to pile up this stuff. Look at the pile-up here." The way I'd construct buildings and things of that nature. They all seemed to be in the right place, he said.

SMITH: Who were the other artists here on the West Coast that Chamberlain was close with? Was there a community of artists that he was involved with, people who had similar ways of thinking, ways of painting?

WAGNER: You mean that Chamberlain would have influenced?

SMITH: Influenced, or were his peers? Who came to his house? Who did he have--

WAGNER: Oh, we all came to his house. There was Dave Miller, Frank Jensen, Ben Shaw--

SMITH: These were painters?

WAGNER: --Luis Monza. We all came to his house. We all centered around there and we all lived around the beach, you know.

SMITH: Were they all cubist in their orientation, too?

WAGNER: Not really, no, not really. I wouldn't say so. Dave Miller painted like Rembrandt. He really did. He was a marvelous painter from Portland, Maine. Luis Monza was a primitive who was as far removed from cubism as you could think. Frank Jensen, he was a, I guess you might call him a California impressionist.

SMITH: Did you know at that time--I'm talking when you were younger--did you know Annita Delano or Conrad Buff?

WAGNER: I knew Annita Delano at UCLA, and Conrad Buff, I knew the Grand Canyon painter. Yes, I knew those people. And a lot of people from Laguna [Beach], like [Walter] Kuprian and [Walter] Wendt. Well, you see, Norman was the head of the Laguna Beach Arts Association for a good time, and he lived in the old milkshed they gave them in the very beginning, up in the hills, back of the town, and that's

where the Laguna Beach Arts Association was. It had a lot of old people like that in it. They had Burninghaus and Blumenschein; same ones that were in Taos were down there.

SMITH: West Coast water colorism, did you like that?

WAGNER: Yeah. There were some nice things, I believe; Emil Kosa, and people like this, you know. And Kosa, Jr., a lot of good watercolor.

SMITH: When we were talking about your tide pool painting earlier and the kind of cubism you were doing, do you feel that you and Chamberlain and other West Coast artists who were using cubist techniques--was there a difference between West Coast cubism and French cubism?

WAGNER: Yeah, I think so, in the subject matter. They were still using subject matter in most of the cubism. A lot of West Coast artists were using a French cubism because they were going a lot to France, you know. There wasn't that much difference, because I don't think there ever was much West Coast cubism, except maybe S. [Stanton] MacDonald-Wright; you might classify him as one of those. He was a pure abstract artist. He was about the closest one I can say that would be to West Coast cubism, but it was still very Frenchy, you know.

SMITH: Was Chamberlain Frenchy?

WAGNER: Oh yeah, I say! He was a Frenchy guy. He did very Frenchy painting. They dripped with Frenchiness.

SMITH: But you weren't.

WAGNER: Not me, no. I wasn't at all because my mind wasn't into that sort of thing, you know. In Laguna Beach they had what they called the eucalyptus school of painters, you know, that's all they did was paint eucalyptus trees and rolling country sides, the landscapes of those early days, you know.

SMITH: You say these people were Frenchy, but what about their relationship to people back East, to the East Coast, contemporary painting on the East Coast? Do they relate to that at all?

WAGNER: Back East at that time, I think most of those artists were more, well, they were more social painters, like--what was his name? Joseph Hirsch and Bellows and Sloan. They were painting boxing arenas, and they were painting people on the street and fighting in subways, and things of that nature, while here I think that the California painters were more nature painters, and sea and flowers and houses and vistas, like their environment, where back there they were painting their environment in New York and Chicago.

SMITH: Which included amusement-- I mean, Sloan has done some amusement--

WAGNER: Well, like all of the Paul Cadmus amusement zones and beaches and things, see?

SMITH: Were you familiar with the magic realists at that time? With Cadmus and [George] Took and Reginald Marsh?

WAGNER: Reginald Marsh was the same because he painted paintings like **High Yaller**, which is one of my favorite paintings of his. It is a black woman coming down the street in a yellow dress.

SMITH: Well, at the time were you going to the museums here or the galleries here in the thirties when you were here?

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, there was only one, if I remember right, that you could go to, that was the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of History, Science, and Art] in Exposition Park.

SMITH: And they would show contemporary work?

WAGNER: Oh, they'd show all kinds of paintings. I saw my first Paul Klee show there when I was a young man. I liked it but the man standing next to me--I don't know who he was--he said, "This man must be crazy, something wrong with his head." And I turned around, and I was with Norman Chamberlain, and I said, "Maybe there's something wrong with your head." [laughter] But Norman used to take me to all of these things, exhibitions like that.

SMITH: You mentioned earlier that you went to high school with Jackson Pollock?

WAGNER: Well, that was only temporary. I went to Manual

[Arts High School] one year, in L.A., and I met him there. And Philip Guston.

SMITH: Were you friends with him? I mean, did you--

WAGNER: I met him, yeah. We got along okay. I wasn't any close friend of his, but we were in the same art class together.

SMITH: You bought a car in 1915? And you bought a house in 1920?

WAGNER: A car in when?

SMITH: Not 1915, 1930. You were fifteen years old. And you bought a house when you were twenty years old.

WAGNER: I was eighteen in-- No, how old was I in 1930?

SMITH: Fifteen.

WAGNER: Fifteen, yeah.

SMITH: How did you afford all this?

WAGNER: But I didn't buy that car. It was a 1930 car, but I bought it when I was eighteen years old.

SMITH: Oh. So from your various jobs and--

WAGNER: Yeah. It only cost two hundred dollars.

SMITH: Well, that's a lot of money.

WAGNER: Well, I saved it up.

SMITH: You have a real bifurcated life. On the one hand, you have a more or less typical beach kind of life, the beach culture and surfing and the body culture and that kind of thing, and on the other hand, you're going to

Europe and painting. Was there any kind of interaction between these two things?

WAGNER: At that time, I was like every other young kid in the world. They don't know where they're going. I was just going. And that's the way it was until I reached about eighteen, nineteen years old, and then I started to think about things, you know, about maybe I'd better do something with my life.

SMITH: When did you go to college?

WAGNER: Well, I started right after high school in '34.

SMITH: Where did you go?

WAGNER: I went to UCLA.

SMITH: And what did you study there? What was your major?

WAGNER: I went there with the idea of getting into the arts department, but they didn't have much going in the arts department, so I got into engineering. I started taking some drawing and design work like that, basic drawing, and got into that business. In the meantime, I got a job-- Maybe you don't want to go to that point yet?

SMITH: No, go ahead. Let's go to it.

WAGNER: I went to work for this EMSCO, where my father was in his time, and I was hired immediately because I was Jake Wagner's son, you know [laughter] naturally.

SMITH: You were about twenty then?

WAGNER: Yeah. Nineteen.

SMITH: Nineteen. So you worked at EMSCO.

WAGNER: That's when I served my apprenticeship.

SMITH: What did you do at EMSCO?

WAGNER: I started in an apprenticeship. The idea was to try to train me to be a sales representative for their company, but I realized that was not where I wanted to be, so I took on this apprenticeship as a tool and die maker. All the executives around there, they said, "Oh, he wants to do that kind of thing with his hands," you know. The vice presidents and the sales managers, they couldn't understand why the son of Jake Wagner would want to work with his hands and do anything like that, because after all, they were the executives of the company. They were rather disappointed that I would want to do that, but I wanted to learn a trade. When I was going to UCLA, I started there, I said, well, I should learn something practical. So I worked in EMSCO learning how to file and work and do things right for precision work. Tool making is a very precise job.

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: It's not something that you fool around with.

SMITH: And you were also a lifeguard at this period?

WAGNER: That was a little later when I did that, in the summer. I started in my tool and die--tinkering with it, you know. I didn't stay with it. I went back to the

beach, and I went to Mexico, and I came back and worked as a lifeguard. I didn't really want a steady job. It would bother me. It was in the way of what I didn't know I wanted to do. But I knew I wanted to do a lot of things and I didn't want to become involved with just-- I could see that was going to be a dead end. I went back to EMSCO, but later.

SMITH: You met Henry Miller?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: When did that happen?

WAGNER: Oh, back in 1940 in Big Sur. I met him up at his house in Parthington Ridge and I was living up there then. That's jumping quite a ways away from 1930--

SMITH: That's okay.

WAGNER: But anyway, Henry Miller at that time was writing and he was married to Lepska Miller. No, at that time he wasn't married to Lepska, it was-- The last time I visited him, he was married to another woman, I think. I can't remember who it was. But anyway, that's when I first met Henry Miller, in Big Sur, when I was living in Big Sur.

SMITH: You mentioned that Miller was the one who gave you a reason to keep on living. It seems like a very dramatic--

WAGNER: Yeah, I'd read an awful lot of his works and he was the only person I had read who gave me a justification

for existing in this society that was so turned off by the arts and was so commercial and so material and so-- It was just-- The whole thing at that time wasn't what I was looking for, and Henry Miller seemed to understand it when I read his books. He expressed it just the way I felt it. Well, I loved the way he wrote about these things.

SMITH: You had gone to Chouinard [Art Institute] for a while?

WAGNER: Yeah, I went to Chouinard also. That was a long time ago.

SMITH: [University of California] Berkeley, you said you went up to.

WAGNER: I had to go to Berkeley one year to finish my engineering degree because they didn't honor-- You had to have one year at Berkeley. You couldn't get your engineering [degree] from UCLA, you had to finish up at Berkeley--

SMITH: Was this a B.A. in engineering that you got?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Did you go on to do graduate work?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: Were you painting seriously at this time?

WAGNER: I was painting all the time, yeah. At least putting in time; oh, I'd work and do things. I'd be painting about four or five hours a day, actually painting.

SMITH: While doing all this other stuff. What kind of paintings were you doing then?

WAGNER: Well, what year are we discussing?

SMITH: Well, '35 to '40, let's say.

WAGNER: 'Thirty-five to '40 I was working basically in-- I did a lot of sea--things related to the sea, you know. I was very stimulated by Big Sur's coastline and all of that and the lyrical movement of spindrifts, and waves, and the movement of water, and the mystery. It was like [Jean] Sibelius's music. The whole place felt like Sibelius, you know, **Finlandia** or **The Tempest**, and I was trying to project that into this. This was done also through a technique I called "scraffiti," where I would paint the whole painting on a white board of a slick enamel, and oil, just rough it all in there, and then I'd go in with a knife and I'd scratch in the whole painting and the white would come in from underneath. I probably did 150 of those paintings.

SMITH: Were you showing them? Exhibiting them?

WAGNER: Yeah. I sold them all. I don't own a single one of them. I just sold the last one about a month ago that I had--it's in an old wooden frame of a cemetery that I did out in Jerome, Arizona.

SMITH: But that's much later you did that.

WAGNER: Yeah. But I've kept working it out through all of those-- I used that technique off and on, you know. I

loved it. I don't do any more scraffiti.

SMITH: You went to Mexico, you said.

WAGNER: Pátzcuaro and Michoacán. I lived there about a year.

SMITH: At this time?

WAGNER: Yeah. About '30. Let's see, what was that? What year are you talking about now?

SMITH: Well, '35 to '40 still.

WAGNER: Yeah. I was there in Michoacán about '35. I'd go and escape there and could live there for nothing. I'd come back and get some other job and I never really wanted to get involved in any company or work. I was always trying to avoid it by going someplace. I always managed to get by somehow and live in comfortable poverty. It wasn't easy.

SMITH: And do your painting. Painting is not an inexpensive art form either.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: There's a bit of a money layout that you have to make. Were you still seeing Chamberlain?

WAGNER: No, Chamberlain died about '38, I think. No, he was still alive. No, I guess he died around, what was it? He died during the war.

SMITH: But were you continuing to see him?

WAGNER: He moved from Hermosa. He moved to Corona del

Mar.

SMITH: Was Hermosa your base-- When you were in L.A. you lived in Hermosa?

WAGNER: Yeah. I bought a house in Hermosa in 1935.

SMITH: Now, how did you afford to buy a house?

WAGNER: Well, it cost me two hundred dollars. [laughter] I put about five hundred into it and I had a very beautiful house one block from the ocean in Hermosa, Twenty-fifth Street and Manhattan Avenue.

SMITH: You lived there by yourself, or did you have roommates?

WAGNER: Yeah, at first.

SMITH: People crashed at your place or--

WAGNER: Oh, I always had a constant party going on. I had people that stayed there. It was a big place. I let them live in the place. Oh yeah, it was quite a beautiful old house I rigged up there by myself. It had a twenty-by-twenty living room in the front I built, fireplace, high-beamed ceilings.

SMITH: At that time, again, your early twenties, did you have ambitions to be a painter, I mean as a-- Did you think that-- A famous painter? Did you have goals in that direction or were you just painting to express yourself?

WAGNER: No, I painted for the joy of painting. Like today, I work for the joy of art. I don't give a hoot

about being famous. It's the last thing in my thoughts. I mean, being famous: I never even considered it.

SMITH: Were your friends beach people? or artists? or poets? or engineers?

WAGNER: My friends were engineers, poets, beach people, doctors, salesmen, lawyers, a couple of first mates on a ship, a steel salesman, executives in companies. I had three friends from Harvard Business School. They were all in administration and were industrial engineers, and they all were taken away to the navy and all became ensigns in the war. They decided to join up. Oh, I had a lot of versatile friends. Lifeguards, athletes. Johnny Wilson, remember John Wilson? He was a high jumper. He was the best in the country at that time, and he opened the Ready Room on La Cienega [Boulevard].

SMITH: What's that, a bar?

WAGNER: Yeah. It was a very good restaurant and bar. A lot of people like this. I had one friend who was a first mate on a tanker, who used to sell star sapphires to all of his friends when he'd come back from India. One of my friends was an FBI agent. We all got together. We all didn't even discuss such things when we were together. Never talked about steel or anything. We'd just have a lot of fun. We could talk about everything. We made jokes and we'd-- We had other things to discuss like--nothing to do

with art.

SMITH: Like what?

WAGNER: Nothing to do with poetry.

SMITH: Like what?

WAGNER: Everything in general, from politics to philosophy to psychology to religion to-- But we didn't get into our own fields. Nobody was going around giving a lot of shoptalk in our group. We kept it to ourselves, because there's nothing more boring in a party than to have somebody doing shoptalk, right? It's really dull, you know. We stayed clean of that.

SMITH: Did you have any steady girlfriends at this time?

WAGNER: Now, what year is this now?

SMITH: Well, before you got married.

WAGNER: Yeah, I had a girlfriend for five years. Her name was Joanne. My love. She was my first love. She was a nice girl. We used to go dancing. She lived in Torrance, and I had to drive all the way to Torrance. At that time it was nice to drive to Torrance, all country roads and eucalyptus-lined roads, and no tract houses, no nothing, you know. A nice trip.

SMITH: Was your circle what people would have called bohemians or was it--

WAGNER: I guess you might have called it that. It might have been the word. They called me a bohemian.

SMITH: The people around you?

WAGNER: Yeah. We were a little different. But the beach was basically a casbah and a lot of bohemians lived on the beach, that's why they lived there. They wanted to get away from all that very straight laced, uptown formality, you know.

SMITH: Who was Fatima? Was Fatima a real person?

WAGNER: Fatima?

SMITH: The Fatima that you write about?

WAGNER: Well, yeah, Fatima was a real person, yeah. She was several different persons, right? She was Egyptian, I believe. If you've ever seen the hands of Fatima, you know, where they hold the hand of Fatima, they make those hands of Fatima. How Fatima got into my life is that it just happened to be the name of a penny arcade fortune-telling machine and that was her name, Fatima.

SMITH: A machine? It wasn't a person?

WAGNER: No, it was a machine. That's how she got into my life. Fatima was just a fortune-telling machine that I really enjoyed and loved in the penny arcade when I was a boy making change. I used to try and shortchange customers so I could make her dance. As for who she was, I'd never met the real Fatima. Fatima appeared to me several times in my life at different points. I found a picture of her one day on the beach, it said "Fatima." There also was a

cigarette named "Fatima" with a picture of Fatima on the cigarette. And the signs used to be around Fatima-- I called her Fateema, Fahtima is the proper pronunciation. And I guess my most recent association with Fatima is Our Lady of Fátima, who is the apparition who came in, what was it, 1915 or something, in Europe--she came to the three children as a vision. One of the manifestations of the mother. She was Fatima because that was where she appeared, Fátima Portugal, the town, so she was called Our Lady of Fátima.

SMITH: Fatima is also the daughter of Mohammed.

WAGNER: Yeah. And horses had the hand of Fatima in the old days on their harnesses, over their foreheads hung the hand of Fatima. It was a protector. This was the hand of Fatima. To keep the evil spirits away. The Navaho Indians used it as a horseshoe. But it's still the hand of Fatima. These are to keep out the evil spirit on their squash blossom necklace.

SMITH: You were in an accident on the roller coaster--

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: --when you were sixteen?

WAGNER: Yeah. It ripped out of the tracks and it took out through the air. There were three of us that lived out of thirty. That was the Giant Dipper.

SMITH: I guess it's the litho you did of the Giant Dipper;

it's the feeling of this mouth devouring the roller coaster, that's one of the things I mean by terrifying. That's not terrifying like the Bug House or-- This represents something of a whole different--

WAGNER: Well, it was terrifying. It was a terrifying experience.

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: That's why. That's a dream, incidentally, that drawing. It's a dream. It's telling me, "Don't go back to that."

SMITH: Have you ever ridden a roller coaster since then?

WAGNER: No, never. I admire them. I think they're one of the most beautiful pieces of engineering that's ever been created. If they can get all that wonderful structure, and the right curves, and proper timing to come back. On a roller coaster, that's a really frightening place, because as soon as the roller coaster starts and the lever man releases the brake that lets the tracks apart so that they drop, they go down through this mouth like this, in a hole, deep, and everybody's screaming in the beginning even, before they even start, you know.

SMITH: But that's a different kind of screaming, because they're not really scared; it's kind of a fake screaming. And then when you leave the tracks, then-- I mean, during the accident, there must have been a whole different kind

of screaming.

WAGNER: Yeah, it was. Well, yeah. But anyway, this drawing has a lot to do with my--

SMITH: Were you in the hospital or were you lucky enough to--

WAGNER: Oh, I didn't have anything happen to me.

SMITH: You walked away?

WAGNER: Yeah. I landed in a swimming pool.

SMITH: Oh, you were lucky.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: You were thrown out of the car then?

WAGNER: Yeah. People were dropping in the skating rink and on machinery and on the rocks. It was pretty disastrous.

SMITH: You know, the unusualness of your combining coffins and the arcade, or the Mexican Day of the Dead kind of imagery with the beach imagery, that's again--sure, there's a whole Halloween-arcade kind of a thing.

WAGNER: The Day of the Dead?

SMITH: But you're playing with something that's more serious in terms of the arcade, the beach as a kind of inviter to death, aren't you?

WAGNER: Well--

SMITH: Invitation to death? I mean--

WAGNER: My basic interest in those drawings was that I was

afraid of death. I had a deep fear of death and through these dreams and through drawings, yeah, that's a rejection--

SMITH: [referring to sign on ticket booth in lithograph] "No!" Right.

WAGNER: I couldn't even get to the ticket office. They wouldn't let me in. But this is a rejection of this fear of death, and the only way I could get the fear of death out was to make these drawings and become associated close enough to it so that I could laugh at it. And by going to Mexico I was able to do this because they laugh at death and they make it--

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MAY 17, 1986

SMITH: I wanted to go back today to how you met Henry Miller. You had already been reading his work?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah, I'd read a lot of his works.

SMITH: Where was it published? Where were you reading them, in magazines or--?

WAGNER: No, books. I was reading several of these books. The one that I really enjoyed was **Semblance of a Devoted Past**. A lot of different publishers were helping him in those days, like Bern Porter was doing work for him; Merle Armitage who was really an enthusiast for Henry Miller. **The Letters to Emil Schnelling** were wonderful; they really change your whole life if you read those of Henry in Paris writing to Emil Schnelling about "quit making drawings and watercolors, 'temperizing'; get into real painting and give up all this material world and get rid of these people who are driving around in their cars and wasting their time and get down to it." What a wonderful book of his. It's a limited edition, very difficult to find at the moment. **Into the Nightlife** was another one, and he actually had handmade drawings. Each book was a little different because everything in it were his drawings, original drawings, and wild poetry. Those two early books were the ones that really got me going.

Then he got more into the--Tropic of Cancer and [Tropic of] Capricorn weren't even allowed in the United States when I was reading these things. They were considered dangerous.

SMITH: Was it friends who introduced you to his works? By word of mouth?

WAGNER: No. A friend of mine in Hermosa Beach by the name of Willard Hougland, who helped publish some of his books with Merle Armitage, the two of them worked together. Willard arrived in Hermosa Beach from Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he was the curator for the Santa Fe museum [Museum of New Mexico]. He had a huge art collection, and he knew everybody in the world. He always talked about these people like he'd just seen them yesterday, and really, everybody thought he was the kind of a guy who didn't know anybody, that he was making it up. When you got down to it, the guy wasn't making up anything. He was telling the truth. He really did know all these people. He was the first one to put me on to Henry Miller. Before he moved down to Hermosa he used to live in Big Sur. He ran an antique shop and bookstore. Basically, he was into books, rare books. In fact, his whole collection was donated to the UCLA Library. All of his rare books. So you can look him up sometime. The Willard Hougland Collection is enormous. He had all these old paintings, Ogden Nash and different people like this, and some of the writer's

paintings. And his brother, I think, Warren Nash. So many different people that he knew.

So he ran this store, Deetjen's, which is the Big Sur Inn now, Deetjen's. At that time--that was back in the forties, Deetjen ran the place, a crazy Norwegian, and his wife Mrs. Deetjen. Later, they had to close up that shop. His wife was with him, Kisha Hougland, the two of them. They had to close the shop because Mrs. Deetjen got so ill that she couldn't live up on the top at the goat house anymore, where they used to live, on the top of the mountain. So they had to move her down there, and she stayed in the shop so she could have her service. She used to sit in bed all day, a huge, big woman, and they used to bring candy bars to her, like fifteen a day she ate. She had to be carried around in a pickup truck, in the back. She was quite a wonderful woman; I loved her, but she was ill. So Willard introduced me through these books to Henry Miller. That's how I got interested in him, how he stimulated me immensely, for being sort of, you might say, against the establishment.

SMITH: Did you go up to meet him?

WAGNER: Yes. I met him--

SMITH: On purpose?

WAGNER: I went there one time with two gallery dealers, Keith Chin and Dean Lee. We took them up there with

Willard. We all went up there, my first wife [Patricia Elliot Wagner]--we all went up there. I was having an exhibition at the time in Pacific Grove in the Blue Pelican art gallery. So we went down to really visit Henry. We went to his house; he was working out in the back. He started early in the morning because he said Big Sur was a state of mind and he never knew what he was writing; he was just typing. He just sat down and let it happen, let it unroll. He sort of hypnotized himself into that. He was always surprised to find out what came out on the typewriter, because some of it he might be able to use. His wife at that time was Lepska Miller, a dancer, who loved to dance around the hills there up on Parthington Ridge. When I first met Henry Miller, I figured he was going to be one of these types of people who would be very gruff and whatnot, but the only four-letter word I ever heard him use the whole time I first visited him was "sure." Not one word came out of him that was profane. He had a beautiful bathroom; had an old bathtub out back, with the balls and the clawed feet, that you poured the water into, and a garden around there with a--I think it was a [Alexander] Calder mobile standing over on one side, and a piece of sculpture by Harry Dick Ross, another artist who lived up the hill from him. And layed in stones on the floor of all this was this inscription, "The greatest of

these is love." So he brought out all of these watercolors and showed them to these two dealers who came and was showing them all these things, and he was just jumping around. He was so happy. But the basic thing he did-- He wasn't very much interested in what he was doing at all. He was more interested in finding out what we were doing and who we were and about us. He said little of himself. They had to extract the watercolors out of him to bring them out to show them. They purchased a few for a gallery in Manhattan Beach called the Graywood Gallery. It had his works and mine and a few other artists in the [South] Bay area.

SMITH: Was he supporting himself through his writing at that time?

WAGNER: Well, not completely, no. Whatever he could get, like stamps from people, or bottles of wine, or-- He liked to trade things. He'd sell a watercolor for a very, very small amount just to exist.

SMITH: So at Big Sur was he living a life of "comfortable poverty"?

WAGNER: Exactly. A very creative time for him, because he wrote many books then. It wasn't until much later that he became famous. I don't think half the population in the United States has ever heard of Henry Miller to this day. Maybe three-quarters. He's just not one of those types of

writers. And I loved Henry Miller's writing because he was always talking about other artists and other writers, other personalities. He always gave me the feeling that I wanted to read what some of these writers were writing, so it opened up my whole library of knowledge through Henry Miller; he introduced these things to me. I would have never ever heard of half of these artists and writers if I hadn't gotten them through him.

SMITH: Who in particular?

WAGNER: Oh, people like Blaise Cendrars, and very remote writings by these people, you know. And the painter--what was his name, from San Francisco--that he studied with-- He lived in North Beach, a wonderful story of how he went to study to be a painter. Marvelous, marvelous story, especially in this particular **Semblance of a Devoted Past.** His name was Hilaire Hiler.

SMITH: When you were getting to know Henry Miller either through his books or in person, it sounds like you were going through some sort of a crisis, an interior crisis. Is that accurate or is that an exaggeration?

WAGNER: I would say that it was a time when I had devoted my younger years to just being an artist and a bohemian, enjoying life, the beach and surfing, skin diving. I was married in 1942 and I had my first daughter in 1942 also. I had to work at that time. It was the time of the war,

and I was working for North American Aviation as a tool maker and then as a tool designer. These long hours and this corporate structure and the people that I was associated with and the surroundings, I realized what a negative situation all this war was and how I was devoting sometimes sixteen hours a day to work double shifts. That's when I really was introduced to Henry Miller; it was during the war at that time. And that's the time when I really said, "What am I doing? Why am I there? Why am I doing that? How am I going to get out of this?" So there was a conflict that I couldn't help because I had to support my family. And yet I wanted to paint, but I didn't have time to do that. I could see this whole nonsensical life that I was overlaying on top of the life I really wanted. He was the man who gave me the light and really told me that as soon as this is all over with, get out.

SMITH: Well, as far as the war was concerned, did you really have much choice about it? If you didn't work, you would have been drafted, right?

WAGNER: Well, I could either be--what was it they called you?--a 2-B, or a 1-A, or something, a deferment for military work. And working for North American Aviation [Company], I got a deferment for that because they needed tool makers and tool designers. After all, you couldn't build anything without them.

SMITH: So that was your basic choice: either go into the army, the military, or work.

WAGNER: Right. And seeing that I'd already been apprenticed to this sort of thing, it was easy for me to fall into it. And I was so happy when they gave me a dollar an hour. I'd never earned a dollar an hour in my life. I used to work for--

SMITH: That was quite a-- I guess it would be equivalent to ten dollars an hour now?

WAGNER: Probably, now. Most of these people in the aircraft plants at that time were making between sixty-eight and seventy-two cents an hour. But the tool makers were getting a dollar an hour, at least in the beginning.

SMITH: Then you owned your own home.

WAGNER: We owned our own home, and I didn't have too many bills to pay in those days.

SMITH: I'd like to back up a bit to your meeting your wife. She was a writer, wasn't she, an artist as well in that sense?

WAGNER: A writer, yeah.

SMITH: I mean an artist in the big sense.

WAGNER: Well, she had totally, totally the philosophy of a bohemian and a great wit. Anybody by the name of Patricia Louise Naomi Elliot couldn't have anything but a wit. She was very Irish. When we first met she was going to UC

[University of California] Berkeley. She was born in Carmel [California], and she knew the whole town of Carmel, because I think at that time there were about eight hundred people living in the town. It was a great place to be. Her father [Peter Elliot] was the manager of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in Monterey at that time. She was born in San Francisco and then moved immediately to Carmel. She was born in a hospital in San Francisco and moved. She was a northern girl, never a Southern California girl. She always said that L.A. was tinsel and San Francisco was mahogany. She could never settle herself for the triteness of L.A. and its junkiness and all one-level buildings. But she tolerated it. She tolerated living on the beach, which she liked. She was a very ambitious girl, and she wrote all the time. She was a rather-- She wasn't what you call a "typical" housewife mother with children. [laughter] She would write all night, sleep in the daytime.

SMITH: What kind of things was she writing?

WAGNER: Well, she wrote short stories, basically, some poetry. I have a few of her poems, but short stories.

SMITH: Plays?

WAGNER: Some. And she wrote some film scripts with a friend of ours, Kirk McDonald, a writer.

SMITH: Were they sold? The film scripts?

WAGNER: A couple of them, yeah. And she worked on a few stories with a writer in Santa Monica Canyon by the name of Morton Fine. Because Willard Hougland was always promoting us, getting her writing through, and getting me some paintings over here, and he'd do this for his artists. And he was the real pope of Manhattan Beach's artists. He was like [André] Breton.

She was a very temperamental Irish. We were married in Carmel Mission. She wanted a Catholic marriage, but she didn't follow the Catholic church too well. She had questions about some of the--being a Berkeley girl. When the time came for us to be married, we had to go see Father O'Connell. He says, "Patty Lou, are you still going to that pagan school in Berkeley?" "Well, of course I'm going." So they got in a big argument about infallibility and everything else. In the meantime, I had to go to the bathroom, and they told me where it was. In those days it wasn't like the Carmel Mission now. It didn't have a museum in it; it didn't have any of those things, just a little office there, and a few rooms, none of the additions put on by Harry and envisioned by Harry.

Anyway, so I went into the bathroom and was sitting there, relaxing, and who should walk through the door but this woman. She walks over to me and she says, "Good afternoon. And who are you?" I can't very well do

anything. I said, "Well, who are you." She says, "I'm Father O'Connell's sister from Ireland." Really. I said, "Well, I'm Gordon Wagner, but pardon me for not getting up." [laughter] So she carries on this conversation with me and I can't get off the toilet, it's an open stall, and I'm sitting there. She's asking me if I've tried golf on the golf links in Carmel and Pebble Beach, and all these questions, you know.

In the meantime, Father O'Connell and my wife were going around in circles. So when I came back, I walked in, he says, "Gordon," he says, "do you realize you're marrying a tiger?" I said, "Yes." "Patty Lou, this man will be a better Catholic than you could ever be if you ever tried." And I wasn't even a Catholic. I had to get a special dispensation from the Pope to do this.

And come the time when we were married, we all went off from the church. All of Carmel and Monterey came. I think there was something like two thousand people there because all of my father-in-law's friends and Patty Lou's friends, we all went. It was an immense wedding. It was just about the time the war started; '42, I think it was, the beginning. A lot of Patty Lou's friends were there in uniform already. The whole affair was going to be in the Del Monte Hotel for the reception, which was huge. The Del Monte in those days was the most fashionable hotel on the

West Coast.

The funniest thing of all was that my father-in-law, who saw all these people off, was standing there without a ride. So this forest ranger from Big Sur came along and said, "Pete, what are you doing here?" He picked him up and took him to the reception. When we arrived at the reception, the forest ranger was right up in front with everybody. Somehow, at that moment, there was a big thing, a movie or something, going on. All of Errol Flynn's crowd was there, and Alan Hale, and all these actors, and they all came to the reception too. The reception lasted for all that day and until the next morning. And the best man and his friend, my friend, an elder gentleman, my friend and best man was Frank Baccone, who was a good Catholic and a tool maker with me at North American, so he took over. Frank told me later that it was quite an evening after the wedding. They all went down to the whirlpool in Carmel near the back of the mission and they sat out on the beach there, Father O'Connell, Frank Baccone, and my friend, Fred. They all sat around and killed off about two or three bottles of Wilkins Family and they all started singing. They really celebrated our wedding. Meantime, we'd gone on to San Francisco. The first night was at the Saint Francis Hotel, room 833. [laughter]

SMITH: What kind of religious training did you have?

WAGNER: I had none.

SMITH: So you were a "pagan"?

WAGNER: Yeah. I followed, later on in my life I followed-- I was interested in Buddhism and Taoism, especially.

SMITH: But at this time when you got married--?

WAGNER: None, none whatsoever. I had no conception of that subject. I didn't even know anything about religion. I never talked about it because I knew nothing about it.

SMITH: Was your wife a religious person?

WAGNER: Well, she was religious enough to have both of our daughters baptized in the Catholic church, but that didn't mean that she went much to church. She knew the philosophy and the religion. She knew them. But she was too much of an intellectual, and it was very difficult for her to accept it, because she was very rational in one way, and logical. That's very difficult, for anybody with a rational, logical mind to be able to really accept the mysteries of Jesus Christ and the tabernacle and the Catholic church. You have to have a blind faith, that's all.

She was always worried about money, and she always wanted to build things and do things and add things to the house. I was always remodeling or building something.

While I was doing that, she was arguing philosophy in the corner with somebody. Like I remember one time I was talking about Descartes, about his infallibility, and she really hit the fan. She said, "What do you mean by that?" And she had a fork--she was preparing salad--and she turned around and she stuck the fork right in my knee about a half-an-inch deep! "My God, what have I done?" [laughter] She was emotionally Irish.

SMITH: Was there a lot of pressure from her family that you work and that you get on the road to having a profession, that sort of thing?

WAGNER: All of that. Constantly.

SMITH: Sort of move off the shop floor into management?

WAGNER: The bourgeois. My mother-in-law was what you'd call the epitome of the bourgeois woman, while my father-in-law was the most wonderful man I've ever met in my life. He didn't care what I did. The mother was always goading. She was a snob that knew nothing. She just didn't know. She'd lived around all these bourgeois people. My father-in-law was just exactly the opposite. He was a man with a sense of humor that would walk down the street. In Santa Monica, the bus depot there in Santa Monica, [the bus] cut around an alley and it missed one day and went right through a jewelry store. I was with him and he walked back to the jeweler and he says, "How much you

asking for the bus in your window?" So this was his humor. You can get it from that.

In Carmel he was an embarrassment to his wife, because he was heavy and he would put on these old torn pants, shorts, and a pith helmet and a walking stick and take a walk down Carmel Beach. She says, "Is that Peter out there again doing that?" He loved us, both of us, because we were the way we were. We were both still bohemians, caught in the trap of the corporate world for a while. He really loved us because we really enjoyed life. My mother-in-law was an alcoholic, mildly so. The more she drank, the nastier she got. My father-in-law was an alcoholic, but only once every six months to a year, and then he'd really hang one on and we'd have to go down someplace and find him in flophouses. He came from a long line of people who ran a hotel in Fargo, North Dakota. And he had, I think, three sisters and five brothers; Peter, Paul, Michael, Matthew, Luke; they were all named after the apostles. And even the daughters were Maria and Veronica. So there was a whole different ambience between him, who said, "I admire you, do what you want," and the mother on the other side. There was an ambivalence all the time. Neurotic is what it was.

SMITH: And you were working what, eight or twelve hours a day?

WAGNER: Maximum--

SMITH: Six, seven days a week?

WAGNER: No, a maximum of sixteen and a minimum of ten.

SMITH: And how many days a week?

WAGNER: Six days a week, sometimes seven during the peak of the war when we had to get out the B-25's and the Mustangs. At that time, we were on about a seven-day week.

SMITH: Well, how did you feel about the war? Did you think that the United States was unjustified? That the war was wrong?

WAGNER: No, I think that they had to do it. We didn't start the war, did we?

SMITH: Well, I'm asking you what you and your friends-- How you and your friends--

WAGNER: I don't believe that we started the German war. I mean, that whole thing had to be-- Hitler was a real monster. Something had to be done. No, I felt that that was important. I was surprised that the Japanese would do what they did. That might have had something to do with us, starting that with Roosevelt-- I don't know. I have no idea, I'm not a war historian, but I know that in 1937 when I was working in the EMSCO Derrick Equipment Company on Alameda Street, that trains, like fifty- to sixty-car trains were traveling down Alameda Street down to the harbor loaded with scrap iron to send to Japan. Down to the harbor, so we could get it all back again in a

different form, they manifested into ammunition. Roosevelt was still around in those days. So that's a tricky one. I'm not sure about the Vietnam War, how that started, but I'm sure that we had to do something about getting rid of those German monsters, the "superrace."

SMITH: Were you and your friends interested in politics?

WAGNER: Not particularly, no. No, I've never been interested in politics since I was born. I'm still not interested in politics that much. I had friends who were. I had a lot of friends who were very interested; that's all they'd talk about. In those days there were a lot of communists among the artists.

SMITH: Did you have friends--

WAGNER: It was very fashionable to be a communist. Oh yeah, I had lots of friends who were communists, socialists. In fact, I voted for Norman Thomas myself when he ran for president. I liked his party very much. I thought he was a stable man with wisdom.

SMITH: I guess if you were to have a political philosophy it would be more like an anarchist, right?

WAGNER: No, not really. I couldn't be an anarchist because anarchy leads to destruction, because there's too many people who don't know what they're doing and would be running around fighting all these other crazy people. We've almost got anarchy now with [Ronald] Reagan, by the

way things go. Everybody's got their own thing going, killing each other, violence all over the place. What's that got to do with democracy and love and the generation that our country was built on? We help them, they come here and kill each other. I think we have pretty much anarchy right now. I personally like monarchy. I'd like to see a king and queen, if nothing more than just to have a fetish in my country, something to look up to, because kings and queens don't have that much power, really. They've got parliaments and all the ministers to do the work for them, but they're in the parades and they're the people that everybody looks forward to. Regality, this elegance of the palaces, and all of their heraldry, and all of this sort of fetish. It gives you much more to respect than some president or something that just came, it was the head of the Screen Actors Guild or governor of California. I admire him for his age and what he's doing, I mean at his age. But sometimes I question what he's doing.

SMITH: Getting back to your wife and her writing: You said she wrote short stories, film scripts. Was she an avant-garde writer? Was she--

WAGNER: My wife?

SMITH: Yeah, your wife.

WAGNER: I would say so. Yeah, she was. Most of the

things she wrote were pretty avant-garde for what was going on in the slick magazines. She used to receive rejection slips every week from them. They were not interested in what she was writing at all, nothing. She never got anything out of a slick magazine. There were underground magazines and books like that, that the more she became-- She published things.

SMITH: Were you doing any painting at all during the Second World War period? Were you able to paint, say, on Sundays?

WAGNER: Very little. I was really quiet-- I was too tired. My energy was drained. It was very difficult to do much for about three years, '42 to '47, '46--four years. It was hard. But I was reading a lot and I was thinking a lot, and things of that nature.

SMITH: Let's talk a little bit about your work as a designer. You moved off the floor of the--

WAGNER: Tool and die--

SMITH: --tool and die shop into design.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: How did that happen?

WAGNER: Well, they asked me if I would like to do that because they needed tool designers. I had not had too much experience in drafting and drawing and things. They said, "You can do it. If you can build these tools, you can

certainly create them." Because I was making drawings and sketches of the tools I was building in the tool and die. So what had to happen was that they had to speed up the progress of tools, so they needed tool designers to get these things designed by somebody that could just throw them the blueprints, and the tool makers could just make the parts.

SMITH: So you had already had all this training, hadn't you, at UCLA and--?

WAGNER: I made these things, oh yeah. So visualization was what was important, to be able to visualize three-dimensional [objects], and know something about mathematics and how to draw, then you would be able to do this. So they knew I could do that very well, so they picked me up and asked me if I would do that, transfer into tool design.

SMITH: This was in North American?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: What kind of tools were you designing? Were they airplane parts that you were designing?

WAGNER: No, no. No parts. Tools.

SMITH: For the manufacture of parts.

WAGNER: For the manufacture of, like, drill jigs. When you make the part you want to put twenty holes in it. You don't want to have to lay out all those holes every part, so you put the part into the jig, and you take the drill

and just drill all the holes at once, and they're all exactly matched to the next jig that's built. You have another mating part and that will have that hole pattern in it so that the bolts go right in together. Things of that nature. And then they got more complicated, assembling jigs to put wings together, and a whole section of an airplane, a center section or something, build the whole framework, and the points, the hole locating it and locate all the ribs, and put all the skins on; it was all in the jigs. Then they opened up the clamps and the whole section fit on. We also did a lot of milling fixtures, for milling machines, where they wanted to have slots and things or different cuts so they could put it up on the milling machine to cut through the slot and move over. It would stop and you'd cut the next one to a certain depth and everything was set so that the parts came out exact on the fixtures. So I was drawing those. Like, somebody would throw me a key or something like this, or a complicated part, a key for instance. It had to have notches in here and notches here, and it had to be made with this here--well, that would take a die. We'd make a die. We'd knock out the rough and we'd machine the slot on a mill through the slot and then the key cutter, who was set up with a hole here, would drill a hole. The key cutter would set up and make the mark where you wanted it. It was all built.

SMITH: So you would do a drawing of--

WAGNER: Of the whole--

SMITH: --the whole thing and then a die would be made?

WAGNER: Details of the parts. Then they would actually order the materials, the tool maker would order the materials to the sizes that were on the drawing, and they would put the holes in the places where they were on the drawing to that part, and the clamps, and the holding fixtures, and everything that had to be. They'd build the whole piece from detail. We'd make a whole drawing showing the whole thing and then show details of the different parts off of that, and then they'd build that, put it all together as an assemblage.

SMITH: Did you have to approve the dies or the tests of the dies?

WAGNER: Yeah, you had to test those to be sure they were working correctly. I would have to grind here and take away there a little bit. A die is a very difficult thing. On jigs and fixtures that's a lot easier because you're not stamping it.

SMITH: You worked on the FJ-1 project? What were you doing there?

WAGNER: Well, that was the beginning of-- That's when tool design wasn't needed anymore. They didn't have any reason-- Tool makers were being laid off and the tool designers were

being laid off, but they needed people in engineering for designing products. So I was asked, along with about eight other designers, if [I] would like to go to work in the engineering department. And I said, "Well, I don't know much about that sort of thing. I'm a machine designer, a jig and fixture designer." "Oh, that's easy," they said. I talked to this chief engineer of the group, and they put us in wing design. I was so bored with that. I said, "Gee, there must be something more interesting to do around here than design a lot of ribs and wings and skins and rivets and things."

SMITH: Did you know anything about aviation? Aeronautics? How wings worked?

WAGNER: Oh yeah, sure. I'd already studied that.

SMITH: Oh, you'd already studied that.

WAGNER: Aerodynamics.

SMITH: At school?

WAGNER: Yeah, but that wasn't necessary to even know about those things. So I said, "I'm not interested in this. I'm going to have to find another job someplace."

"Oh no, we'll just transfer you."

I said, "Look, I've designed machines and all kinds of moving things, and--"

"Oh, Eric Martin over here, go see him. He'd love to have you."

So I said, "What does he do?"

"Oh, he's a landing gear designer."

So I got into that. That was something else. I mean, I worked there for about a month before I knew what I was doing. It was so complex because all these compound angles, there's nothing that's true.

WAGNER: So I had to go back and study descriptive geometry and really understand how these landing gears moved in the different positions. We call it kinematics, different parts of the movement that the landing gear would pass through. We would lay it out in those stations where we could find out it would travel, and something that was going to be drawn, in that state it would be maybe five inches too short than when it was in the flat state. So we had to use the two angles and then take the resultant of the two angles, and that made the true length. So I had no conception of what I was doing in the beginning. It took me a while. And also, I had to really brush up on my stress analysis and strength of materials because we were working with a safety factor of 1.5 on all the parts.

SMITH: Which means?

WAGNER: Well, 1.5 over the tensile strength, the psi. Otherwise, a piece of aluminum was good for bending and whatnot, and it's good for about 20,000 psi. You had to have 1.5 of that, which was about nothing, you know; it's right on the border. Where with steel they used to take a safety factor of 4. Because they wanted to keep the load down, lightness, and right to just above where it would wham, you know. All this analysis. So I started. I came

up with an idea, because they threw me this thing of turning the nose wheel over and going up through the doors of the airplane, like this, the nose wheel. When it reached this point, I had a cam like this, and on the shimmy dampener I had a roller that was keyed into this cam like that and pulled the shimmy dampener, and the wheel would lay over flat when it went up inside the wheel well so the doors could shut and close. So I invented that thing while I was there; I developed it. Unfortunately, it was a pretty straight thing because it was just coming up and the cam had to curve, because going through a radius like this, it had to move over enough to take that and also move it up, so the cam sort of came up like that. I put that together and invented that idea for them, or developed it. Eric Martin, who was the boss, he says, "Gordon," he says, "that's beautiful. You're a damn genius. I love it." They had all the brass up there from the air force and all these people seeing how I was turning the wheel over. So he gave me a $100 a month raise right on the spot for that.

Then he threw me all kinds of things with hydraulics where I used to make monkey motions. I loved to make monkey motions. They were cardboard cutouts. A certain lever would come this way, and it would push another lever with a spring that would hit this lever and operate a

hydraulic valve that would open the doors. Then go over and hit this valve which would drop the landing gear. When the landing gear had locked it would pull down another cable that operated the hydraulic belt and shut the doors under it so that there wouldn't be all that air in there. Then the gear would be down. Then the reversal of the thing. I used to make these cardboard cutouts all the way across my drawing board using thumb tacks and string and letters. I used to get all the brass. They couldn't stand-- They'd come around to look at my monkey motions. I advanced very quickly in that department. Really fast! [laughter] It was incredible. Because nobody did monkey motions; it was all theoretical. But I was a man of the building of things and the workbench, and I knew how to do these things physically, so I said, "Well, why should I intellectualize all these things and try to figure these things out? I'm just going to build one on the drawing board like I would a piece of sculpture or something." This really made a big impression on that group. After that, several of them were building monkey motions. But it was moving parts, you see. That's where I had to be. I didn't want to be in the static departments. So much stuff is static: frames and fuselage, you know, fuselages and the rudders and the tails and the wings. But the landing gear was a special place. That's one of the reasons I

remember all the controls. We had to chase all these cables around through the airplane, all the aircraft controls, all these things, with pulleys and cables. We always wondered how were we going to get through there. We'd have a cable coming down right there, and I'd go see a man over there that was designing the cabinetry or something and find out that my cable was going right through his radio cabinet, so we had to move to another place. This was all on the drawing board stage. So finally I told my boss one time, I said, "I don't know if this is proper or not, but you ought to build this whole damned airplane and then get a big mouse and a piece of cheese and stick the cheese in one end of the airplane and the mouse on a string at the other end and let him travel through, and how he gets through is where we run our cable." But he never bought the idea. [tape recorder off]

SMITH: You also worked on engine coolers?

WAGNER: Yeah, that was in a different place, Air Research.

SMITH: This was after the war.

WAGNER: Yeah. Then I went over to Air Research-- I left North American [Aviation Company] right afterwards. I didn't stay there very long.

SMITH: So what kind of-- You were developing jet engine coolers?

WAGNER: Yeah. Aircraft engine coolers, all coolers for

aircraft.

SMITH: Were you successful in developing them?

WAGNER: Well, I wasn't developing coolers. I was working there on a machine to solder coolers quickly. All in one lump; it was like a big metal cylinder that had all these beehives, tubes, in it. The idea was for it to come up to this machine and all at once--whew!--it would solder the whole thing in one shot [snaps fingers] just like that. Quick, get them off the line. So I was developing this machine.

SMITH: Now, you told me that you also worked with Robert Oppenheimer for a while.

WAGNER: Yeah, that was in another company. That was at Hufford Machine Works in Redondo Beach. And Harry Wood, and both of us worked on this project for an atomic load testing machine for atomic piles. It was to be installed in Pajarito Plateau in Los Alamos, New Mexico. It was our first experience with remote control operation. The whole machine actually weighed about four and a half tons. What it tested was something like six or seven ounces, something like that. We were running all sorts of tests with platinum and gold and all kinds of rods and iron. We had strange names like Alka Seltzer ejector. That pushed a dead mouse out of a hole that was inside the piece of load. We took a mouse and he went through the thing and they

pushed him out. There were divining rods and also control rods, but these were all done from five or six miles away in a block house.

SMITH: What was your roll in designing this, the remote control or the actual--?

WAGNER: We had to design the-- Our role was to design the machine, which was a real project, believe me, because there were so many safety factors that had to be considered in case it didn't work. We had a thing called a scram mechanism, which practically dismantled the whole machine.

SMITH: So there wouldn't be an atomic explosion?

WAGNER: Right. All that sort of thing. Things that we were completely unrelated to but found out a lot about. It was wonderful, very interesting. New technology, finding out about computers and things like that.

SMITH: How well did you get to know Oppenheimer?

WAGNER: Well, I used to talk with him a lot. He'd come about once a month to see how we were doing. I remember one morning we were expecting him, and he didn't show up and didn't show up. He was supposed to be there at nine so the whole time there was a pounding on the wall and we couldn't figure it so we went back and Oppenheimer was locked in the bathroom, one of these old bathrooms had lock hooks. It slipped down when he went in and he was locked in on the inside, and he couldn't get out. He was on

time! We laughed about that. We just had a ball that morning. [laughter]

SMITH: Did you have a chance to talk to him about non-work-related things at all?

WAGNER: Not much. You're supposed to be very serious, what we were talking about. We never had any real rapport. He did have a sense of humor. You had to have a sense of humor to be locked in a bathroom for an hour. He was a very mild-mannered man. He knew exactly what he wanted and how to get there.

SMITH: There's a big question behind all of this, your ten years as a professional engineer. Has any of that affected your artistic work, your conception of pieces that you do?

WAGNER: No, I don't believe so. I think what it basically has done is it makes it easy for me to manifest that concept. It makes it very easy for me, the physical building, because I understand the materials and how to get there fast and properly without wasting a lot of time on false measurements and mistakes. It's much easier for me to see three dimensions.

SMITH: Have you ever made any pieces that are a comment on science or engineering or the war industry, aerospace? Did you do anything that had the bite that the Dave [David] Quick pieces have?

WAGNER: Yeah, I made a few pieces in my life that were a

satire of technology. I remember I had one piece that Rich Dehr, the owner of the Discovery Inn in Topanga Canyon, a good restaurant-- He was actually a songwriter and he bought a piece from me.

SMITH: What sort of a piece was it?

WAGNER: Well, it wasn't like Dave Quick; it was a stabile piece. It wasn't kinetic, but it had all these very complex pieces of things and objects and people running all over the place and in and out of things with hammers and tools and very busy not doing much of anything. I called the piece **The Bright Young Men.** I made others about peace, war: I've done things like that through my life. Back in the sixties I got into a lot of that, protest and anger.

SMITH: But generally your work seems to be--the universe that it relates back to is pre-World War II, pre-twentieth century; the kinds of characters and boats and trains and the houses, the clothing. Is there a reason for that, other than it just appeals to you? Is there a statement you're making?

WAGNER: Yeah, I think basically I appreciate nostalgia more than I do the advancement of technology. I appreciate the old and the beautiful more than I do plastic. I appreciate classical music more than common popular junk. As for poetry, I think I appreciate the contemporary poets and especially the kind of people in the renaissance of

poetry. But I like Shakespeare, I like the master. He said it all. But I never really put myself into the Shakespearean times. In fact, I don't think I put my work into any time whatsoever. I like to keep my work timeless.

SMITH: But it does strike me that there is a time of the Victorian era, or, you know, the era of the Crystal Palace and the Grand Palais, of Napoleon III.

WAGNER: Well, these have always been more my feelings of a place where I must have been when I was someplace else in time. In my childhood, I was raised around such architecture on the beach, with these buildings, the palaces of gaiety, and really good workmanship. It wasn't just flat, plastic building, or glass. The elegance and detail. Sometimes I incorporate that into my work. I try to do it with a timelessness, [incoporating] skies, clouds, things of that nature.

SMITH: The card imagery, the playing card imagery, has a feel of late nineteenth-century French cards and theatrical--

WAGNER: Well, I think that's all symbols for me: chance with the playing card, and the imagery of foolery, of gestures, the irrational.

SMITH: But there's an aspect, there's a way that you take one aspect of the imagery, one--

WAGNER: Fragment.

SMITH: --fragment of it, but the fool on the playing cards could be represented in different ways, and you seem to have a predilection for the late nineteenth-century representation. Not that you do it slavishly, that it's a slavish copy, but there is a piece that seems to relate to the way you see things, that relates back to that period.

WAGNER: Well, playing cards fascinate me only from the point of the aesthetic value. I don't even care about playing cards at all. They're symbols of-- They come from royalty and they go back, you know, back in the early days when they invented playing cards in France. Any commoners who played cards would be imprisoned because they were only for the royalty, for the aristocracy. Before that the playing cards came out of the Cabalists. And there are so many different kinds of playing cards, so many beautiful faces of playing cards that have been selected, even through the American Indians: playing cards made out of skins, like the Mexican playing cards which were from the Spanish, and the Spanish from the Cabala. So the cards themselves are what interested me, the beauty of them. When I can find an old card on the street that is weathered and beaten and worn out, it's a wonderful find. And if I found a brand-new ace, I wouldn't see anything so exciting about that.

SMITH: When did you start painting again?

WAGNER: Right, right immediately, when I got time. Probably even '44.

SMITH: When you really started doing artwork again intensively, had your ideas changed, your subjects, your approaches changed?

WAGNER: Well, my way of painting changed. I was working more or less with the same imagery, but I was using the scraffiti technique at that time.

SMITH: That's when you developed it?

WAGNER: Yeah. And that went through-- I must have done about a hundred paintings, at least a hundred paintings with the scraffiti technique.

SMITH: Could you discuss the Barrington series?

WAGNER: Well, for a while I was working in a company in West L.A. right on Stoner [Avenue], near Montana [Avenue], Transco Products. I was designing a machine to package dried food, lima beans and beans and lentils.

SMITH: You had quit the aerospace industry?

WAGNER: Oh yeah, this is way after the war. I was designing this machine for a small company. I was the only engineer in the place. Finally another gentleman, Frank Wylie--his wife [Edith Wylie] ran the [Craft and] Folk Art Museum--Frank was working there. He was developing cams and I was developing this machine that would bag up one bean bag every second for the Washburn Wilson Seed Company

in Moscow, Idaho: Bud Wilson was the client. And while I was working there, I would take off my lunch hour, and right up the street about two blocks was wonderful Barrington Avenue, with all of those old houses and broken-down places. A lot of Mexicans lived there, just north of Wilshire [Boulevard]. I loved it and I used to make drawings there every day. I would take long lunch hours [laughter] and make drawings and paintings. Well, you know, mostly pastel drawings and some paintings I developed from that. And then I had my Barrington series of paintings.

SMITH: So what were you trying to do in this series? What kinds of effects were you after?

WAGNER: I was trying to-- I just loved the feeling of the architecture of these old structures and textures and weathered buildings and the way they disconnected themselves and the chicken coops ran down through the outhouses and the houses into the-- This is a very fashionable neighborhood now. But in those days it was a gully. The houses were all along the gully. It was a nice pile up of structures. I always was fascinated by buildings and architecture like that.

SMITH: What kind of colors were you using?

WAGNER: Primary. In the paintings. Strictly primaries. I mean, as bright as possible, red, yellow, blue, green.

Oh yeah, real strong. They were powerful paintings.

SMITH: Then you also began to do work involving myths and legends of Mexico. How did that interest develop?

WAGNER: The actual--

SMITH: You were starting to paint Mexican myths and legends.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: I guess Indian myths.

WAGNER: When I first went to Mexico, I wasn't really worried about much of anything except going and living there and getting away from engineering and to get out of the country. And you're saying 1940?

SMITH: Forties, after the war, late forties.

WAGNER: Well, after the war, well, then I took my family and we went to visit Mexico. I went there with an open mind, that anything might happen, anything. That's why I like to go on trips for a year or two, I go with an open mind.

SMITH: So you went down to-- You quit your job and you went down there for six months?

WAGNER: Yeah, about six months to Pátzcuaro.

SMITH: As much money as you had, or--

WAGNER: I had $500. I figured that that might be enough to keep me.

SMITH: How did your wife feel?

WAGNER: Well, she wanted to go; she wanted to write. [laughter] When I got in Mexico, I found all sorts of ceremonies and things and fiestas and things we don't have in this part of the world here, the fireworks and the **castillos** and the energy of these people and the objects and the paper goods that I found and the junk and the collage materials that I could use maybe someday. I had no conception of what I was going to do with them, but I kept it all, collecting objects there just like anyplace else, just collect them up on the street, you know.

My first series of paintings I did in Mexico were sort of-- I loved to look at places like old funeral parlors with the coffins on the doors and things like that that you wouldn't ever see in America. I was fascinated by all these things you'd never find in America: Old cars with things in the back seats and lights that went on and off. Then there's the curtains that were in cars and trucks, they called them **cortinas**, with tassels. So many things, different things. The whole place was like an assemblage, Mexico. It was like walking through a giant assemblage. And the people I found to be incredibly friendly and beautiful. So I just fell into making a lot of drawings, basically. Started with walls and textures, graveyards and whatever came to me.

SMITH: Were there particular ceremonies, legends, that had

stronger appeal to you?

WAGNER: Yeah, there were several, like their dances, at different times of the year. The Day of the Dead was a great ceremony. I did a lot on the Day of the Dead. I did quite a bit on the patron saints days. Pátzcuaro's patron saint was [Felipe] de [Peru] Virgin de Salud, virgin of health, for the fishermen at lake Pátzcuaro. The butterfly fishermen and the Isle of Janizío, where they have the ceremony of the Day of the Dead. The Tarascan Indians were something else that were there. Their ceremonies were all sorts of wonderful dances with boar masks and all sorts of masks and wonderful things. Boy, their ceremonies around Christmas and on saints' days, they arrived, they were doing fertility dances and horn dances and all these things. It was an endless fiesta, Mexico. In fact, I was told one time there were three hundred and eighty-five fiestas a year in Mexico. [laughter]

SMITH: Yeah, but you described your artwork as being more in touch with the visual kinds, rather than the mythical kinds of things.

WAGNER: In the beginning, because I wasn't too aware at that time of the mythical side. That came later.

SMITH: You were impressed by the spectacle of the--

WAGNER: I was just impressed by the whole thing. There was a magnitude that was indescribable almost. Mexico in

those days was a whole different Mexico than it is today.

SMITH: What about the mobiles that you did?

WAGNER: Well, I did those in Hermosa [Beach] in 1947. I built quite a few of those. One I really tried to develop was this **Ballet Mobile.**

SMITH: What was that?

WAGNER: Well, that was a piece that was in a box with mirrors, converging mirrors into a box, and it turned in the center. I was trying to use that box to create a stage for ballet performers, for the dancers to go-- I have the whole storyboard somewhere about this, and how the lovers-- the dancer who was the artist who was building this beautiful mobile. Then there was the antagonist over here who was trying to take the ballerina away from the artist, who tried to smash the mobile. It all winds up with the artist and the ballerina actually in the mobile, level with the movements. It would be a huge piece. In the theater.

SMITH: Did you construct it?

WAGNER: I never constructed it any farther than the [maquette] because nobody would listen to me. Then I took it to Frank Perls because he was kind of advanced in those days.

SMITH: Did you know Lester Horton?

WAGNER: Well, I met him, yes.

SMITH: Would he have been the sort of person you would

have taken this to?

WAGNER: No, I sent the whole concept to Mama Malano at the New York City Ballet. I never got an answer because they thought I was some kind of a nut.

SMITH: It sounds more like a modern dance concept than a ballet concept.

WAGNER: It was. Well, I called it the Ballet Mobile, and it never got off the ground. But I tell you, I sent it as an art piece built as a concept and took it to Frank Perls. He looked at it and said it was very interesting and then he said, "Excuse me," and never came back. I was sitting here with this old guy in the room. There were two of us sitting there and waiting for him, and he said, "What an incredible piece. Why don't you put it on a film? It would be beautiful on a film." And I said, "Well that's possible." And that was Fischinger. [laughter]

SMITH: Oh, Oskar Fischinger?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Nothing came of that? Did anything come of it?

WAGNER: No, because the reason I took it to Frank Perls in the first place was because he was a dealer for [Alexander] Calder in Beverly Hills on Rodeo Drive. He was one of the top galleries in Beverly Hills.

SMITH: Oh. Is this also the light machine?

WAGNER: No, no, the light machine came later. That's

another piece.

SMITH: What is the light machine?

WAGNER: Well, the light machine was in a box about three feet by two feet high, three feet wide, and about two feet deep, with sandblasted glass on the front. In the back I had all these wheels of gelatin paper, and mobile parts turning, and gelatin paper of different light, and the lights in different corners. This thing would move very slowly, and it would keep changing its imagery like a moving abstract painting in front of the glass. That's what you saw, these colors changing like a moving screen of color.

SMITH: Did you make it?

WAGNER: Oh yeah, I made it, oh yeah. I made about three of those.

SMITH: Where are they?

WAGNER: Well, I built one once for the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach for old [Howard] Rumsey when he had it. He had it up over the bar for awhile. He took it somewhere. I don't know whatever happened to that one. Then another one--

SMITH: Were these perpetual motion--?

WAGNER: No, it was run by a motor. But I had a fan also inside, very slow turning, so it would get a little air. So it would get these other mobile forms moving against the

rotating wheels of gelatin paper so you had these other parts moving in front. What happened was that, after that, I scrapped the other one when I moved from Topanga. I threw it away because it was in a mess, and nothing really ever-- I tried to put that in a-- I presented it to a few architects. Then when the hippie movement came along and the psychedelic revolution hit, everybody was building these things. Hundreds of people [were] making them. You could see them every place, light boxes. They had them, you could buy one in a head shop for-- And everybody got onto it.

SMITH: I wanted to ask you about your painting, **Mexican Interior**, that got written up quite a bit at the time, 1948, '49.

WAGNER: That was an interesting painting. I still have it, I think. It's still out there somewhere. It was painted about-- I can't hardly remember when it was right at the moment. It was a pretty strong painting about sort of the sadness of Mexico and yet there was a feeling in there of this woman who was very happy doing what she had to do within this, against the wall of this building. I was using the interior of the buildings and the light passing through the roof. Because half the houses in Mexico didn't have roofs; a roofless house, you know. So you were in and out in this painting. It was a nice

painting.

SMITH: Did you sell most of your paintings?

WAGNER: Yeah, most of them.

SMITH: Where were they sold?

WAGNER: Oh, to different people: private people and collectors and galleries.

SMITH: Did you have galleries that showed your work, or was it at shows?

WAGNER: In exhibitions at galleries, yeah. The show you're referring to here, where the Mexican material was, I think I sold a half a dozen paintings.

SMITH: But what I'm trying to get at is really just the economics of being a painter. You're working all the time doing these things

WAGNER: But it wasn't very--

SMITH: Southern California, late forties: where did you go with these?

WAGNER: No, it wasn't economically-- It wasn't that good in the forties. There were people who were buying things as long as you were selling them cheap.

SMITH: Cheap meaning how much?

WAGNER: Oh, $100.

SMITH: Which was equivalent to what, $500, $750 now?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: So $100 would be considered a reasonable buy for--

WAGNER: Back in those days, yes.

SMITH: But that was still considered a sizable amount of money in those days, too.

WAGNER: Oh yeah. Well, it kept me going for awhile.

SMITH: Did you have a particular gallery? How did the galleries work?

WAGNER: Well, you mean in the forties?

SMITH: Yeah, in the forties.

WAGNER: I had Willard Hougland--

SMITH: Who was in Hermosa Beach.

WAGNER: --my friend, who had a gallery called the Willard Hougland Gallery, right down in a place called Greenwich Village. That's the name of the street going--

SMITH: The Greenwich Village Art Colony?

WAGNER: Yeah, that was sort of-- It was all part of the same neighborhood, and Willard sold a lot of works for me.

SMITH: Now, who were the people who would be buying them? What did they look for?

WAGNER: Well, there were all kinds of people at that time that were just excited at the art because there wasn't much art going on. People that you didn't even have any idea would buy your art would come and buy your art. Like I remember Willard sold a piece to Mark C. Bloom. I had another gallery that Willard sent me to, next to Perino's on Wilshire Boulevard. They sold quite a bit for me at the

same time. People off the street would come in and buy art. When I was working in these places, they knew I was a painter and we'd get to talking about painting, and talking about that and about this, and they were very interested. They would buy my works for their houses. They had no idea of art. They just liked the paintings.

SMITH: When you were painting, did you consider what potential buyers might want?

WAGNER: No, never. No, I wasn't interested at all, ever. Not to this day do I care what they want. I haven't changed.

SMITH: Say the Willard Hougland Gallery, how did that compare in terms of standing and prestige to, say, the galleries in Beverly Hills?

WAGNER: Well, at that time, there weren't that many galleries in Beverly Hills. Willard Hougland would be-- At that time there was Bill [William] Copley's gallery, a surrealist gallery: he handled only surrealists, [Joseph] Cornell and people like this. All of the French and European, strictly. He probably had the best gallery. Then there was Frank Perls who was a top gallery. You wouldn't rate Willard Hougland with that league, no. Willard Hougland would be comparable to lots of galleries that are now operating. He showed the best he could. He showed people like James Jarvaise and Henry Miller and

myself, quite a few other [South] Bay area artists down there. [Francis] de Erdely, people like that. And Ruth Bernhard, the sculptor, I mean she's a photographer, one of the best, he showed her. He showed a lot of good people. And Betty Binkley, who was an excellent painter. Those were the-- He showed good quality art, and he wasn't interested in the picture framing or picture gallery at all. The other thing he had adjacent to the gallery, which was a beautiful thing that had nothing to do with the gallery, he kept it separate, but he had this rare-book store where you could-- So that brought in all sorts of intellectuals who were-- He had the first edition, hand signed by [W.] Somerset Maugham, you know, and lots of Henry Miller.

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SMITH: I thought we'd start talking today about-- In 1949 you started doing wood assemblages. How did that come about?

WAGNER: It seemed that I'd been working a lot in linear forms in my painting, a lot of nature, of rocks and walls and things like that, and textures, painting them, and I was getting a little bit bored with painting. One day I decided to take some of this old wood that I'd found, all these old textures that I'd had in a box for years-- I couldn't throw them away--and I started tinkering around with them. My first piece was a standing piece. It was a group of balls on a post from a stair balustrade, and an old piece of wood with a wire hooked on the top of it that was beautifully shaped, and another piece from an old house somewhere, all polychromed. There were seven pieces, and I called the piece **The Seven Actors**. And at that point, I got thinking, you know, these things, all this old weathered stuff and all these polychromed pieces, they're so beautiful and they are just thrown away. If they were presented again in a new form, in sculpture, they'd take on a different aspect. Also, all of these old actors would be reemployed into a thing of beauty and harmony. So that was the title of my very first piece, **The Seven Actors**.

Actually, the ball piece out of the balustrade is something I grabbed onto one time when I went running down the stairs of this building. It was a very fancy fretwork, and when I got outside I still had it in my hand. I couldn't go back and tell them, "Look what I've done," so I just took it with me. From then on I started looking at more old woods, and when I'd go to the beach-- At first everything looked good, all kinds of wood. But after looking for awhile, your selectivity gets a lot better. Like if you've never been to the beach before, you'll pick up the first stone you find. As you go to the beach, you'll start editing these beautiful stones you find, and most of them will remain where they belong, right on the beach. This old wood has the same sort of feeling to me. When I see it, it just hits me. Or any object. Not much I can do about it but pick it up because I have sort of like a desire to collect old wood and the lust for old wood and polychromed pieces. So that's how I really got into this. Instead of painting, I started using my imagery in the painting and the linear and making linear found woods, not changing anything--

SMITH: Did you paint--

WAGNER: --not altering anything, not painting it; using it as just a pure piece that was found on the beach, or on the desert, or wherever. On the street. And it was never

altered at all in size, shape, or color. It was just pure. That's the way it is. That's how I really got started into making these first assemblages, a three-dimensional painting.

SMITH: But **The Seven Actors** sounds as if it were a sculpture in a sense, or a standing piece.

WAGNER: Right. It was a standing piece; it was a small piece, it wasn't big or anything. It wasn't any major thing, but it was something that excited me because it was my first piece like that that was made of found objects.

SMITH: Then you also did framed pieces, hanging pieces, right?

WAGNER: Well, this is when the hanging pieces started, but as I say, they were three-dimensional paintings without paint.

SMITH: Would the sort of thing you were doing be considered funk art?

WAGNER: At that time?

SMITH: At that time.

WAGNER: Well, not exactly, because it was more found-object art and not funk, because [Kurt] Schwitters-- It was more related to what Schwitters was doing. I don't think that Schwitters would have ever been classified as a funk artist. He actually made a statement once when he wanted to become a dadaist, he told them that he nailed these

paintings together. And that's exactly what I was doing, nailing my paintings together, because they were nonobjective, and they had no particular message one way or the other at that time.

SMITH: Were there other people in California who were doing similar kinds of things? Taking found objects and creating art?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Quite a few. Ed [Edward] Kienholz, for one, was working that way at that time.

SMITH: Did you know him already at that time?

WAGNER: Yeah, I knew Ed very well.

SMITH: Okay, let's backtrack a little bit.

WAGNER: I met him first in Topanga Canyon, when I lived in Topanga.

SMITH: But that was later, in the fifties, right? In the mid-fifties?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: You had already started doing--?

WAGNER: Well, yeah, but the-- We paralleled each other, you see.

SMITH: Okay. Simultaneously, you were also doing--in the late forties you were doing your Big Sur paintings. What were you trying to accomplish with those?

WAGNER: Well, I always had a sort of a-- I've always had a romance with the sea and the movement of water. And being

a skin diver and affiliated with the sea, when I got a feeling like that it was like listening to [Jean] Sibelius or **La Mer** of [Claude] Debussy. That kind of imagery was in the painting, you know, to get that movement of water it's almost like the land is crawling out to the horizon. In Big Sur it's not like the beaches of Hermosa [Beach] and Manhattan [Beach], where there's just little waves. The northern coasts are dramatic: big rocks and lots of movement and heavy seas and turquoise waters, the sand is so clear underneath that it reflects the water into a turquoise. I wanted to get all the spindrifts and the waves coming back and-- It's the elements. I was trying to project that into the work in a sort of a, I would call it an impressionistic way. I wasn't trying to do it in a pretty seascape, you know, but in the feeling of all this movement.

SMITH: So were you influenced at this time by any of the abstract expressionist kind of-- The abstract expressionist paintings that were coming out of New York, were you aware of them?

WAGNER: Oh yeah, I was aware of them and I-- But I didn't want to be like them; I wasn't interested in painting like them or any other painter. I was trying to be myself. But I always appreciated them. I liked the ones even before the abstract expressionists. There was a whole school in

there, the ashcan school, and that group.

SMITH: What about the magic realists? Had you been aware they were--?

WAGNER: I liked them, oh yes, and the futurists. But basically, I was more interested in the surreal aspect of things. They classified abstract expressionism in the surrealist movement. I guess it's only because they worked from the inside, the interior, the dream state. And through the subconscious: automatic painting, automatic writing, and all these things of the early poets, [Robert] Desnos and [André] Breton, but I don't-- I never was that much influenced by [Jackson] Pollock, or by [Robert] Motherwell or any of that. [Franz] Kline or whatnot. Although later on I did have a feeling to get into that. You know what I mean?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: But it was just a slow evolvement.

SMITH: Well, you went to high school with Jackson Pollock, right?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Were you friendly with him at that time?

WAGNER: Yeah, I knew him. Yeah.

SMITH: Did you keep in contact with him after he left L.A.?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: No?

WAGNER: Well, I think from there he went up to Wyoming or someplace. Then he started drip painting, you know, in an old barn, I believe. I'm not sure if it's history at that point. Then he met Peggy Guggenheim, I believe, and that took him back to New York. But he was a very-- If I think back now, he was really working with Thomas Hart Benton, right? He did a lot of work with, and painted sort of like, Thomas Hart Benton. Where was he, in the Middle West someplace?

SMITH: Missouri, right?

WAGNER: I think so; I think that's where he went to study. But I'd never really followed him that much because he was going his way. Philip Guston was another one, he was going his way. They went to New York. Like, H. C. Westermann, he was from California. And he said, "I never knew what art was until I moved back East." [laughter] Because he was from L.A.

SMITH: Well, you said in the first interview, you said there was no such thing as art in California at that time. What about Rico Lebrun? Did you know him? Had you ever met him?

WAGNER: I'd met him a few times. I was in the same gallery that handled his work for about thirteen years, the Silvan Simone Gallery. Rico was a different kind of a-- He

was a very powerful artist and very spiritual. He was always into something that had to do with The Divine Comedy or the terraces of hell or the crucifixion. I do remember once he had an exhibition in the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of History, Science, and Art], probably, oh it must have been in the forties, sometime in the forties, where he had the exhibition of the crucifixion show. And at the very-- Just before it opened, he was hanging up the last piece on a ladder, working. All of the society arrived, and they couldn't understand what he would be doing there still, a workman still there when they'd arrived. He never bothered to tell them that he was Rico Lebrun, the artist, that it was his show they were coming to see. [laughter] But he was a fairly good muralist and [good at the] painting of the figure. He would rotate the figure and maybe overlay it and superimpose it, and he took the inside of the figure and peeled it from the inside out like an orange. He stimulated people like Howard Bradford and [Howard] Warshaw, [Keith] Finch. He taught with Herb [Herbert] Jepson, who is in San Pedro here at the Angel's Gate Cultural Center, who had the Jepson Art Institute. He taught in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. He was a very powerful painter. He died of leukemia.

SMITH: His reputation seems to have been eclipsed a little bit. Why do you think that is?

WAGNER: What?

SMITH: His reputation seems to have been eclipsed somewhat since his death. Why do you think that's--?

WAGNER: His reputation?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Now?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Well, how do I feel about that? I don't think he's-- I don't think anybody even hardly knows Rico Lebrun anymore. He's been almost a forgotten artist.

SMITH: But why is that? At one point he was the best known of Los Angeles painters, wasn't he?

WAGNER: I think that's one of the big problems right now in our society, and in California especially. I can't understand it, but so many of the older artists that were really doing things and experimenting and teaching and working have just been forgotten about. They dropped out of the whole art world for a handful of younger people who have come in. A lot of artists ask that question that you're asking me. What happened? Why are we not being recognized? We should be; we're old enough. You know? But yet somebody off the street can come along with very little talent and a lot of power to walk on other people, I guess. I don't know how they do it. They're taught the corporate way. They seem to be able to handle it all right

and swing these exhibitions, where older artists don't seem to be interested in them at all. That's here in Los Angeles. In New York I think Rico Lebrun's work is still being shown, and in Europe and places like that, you know. He's not forgotten. He's got works in museums. I remember an awful review one time. I'm not going to say anything about who wrote this review, but it was in **Artforum** magazine. It was in about 1960, I believe, or '62, and an exhibition was being held in San Francisco. It was a big exhibition, major work.

SMITH: Retrospective of--

WAGNER: Yeah. And the critic made the comment, "This show is so bad that it's almost impossible to believe that we have such terrible artists. But aren't we fortunate not to have Rico Lebrun in the show." That kind of promotion doesn't help artists at all.

When [Lebrun] died, Silvan Simone took most all of the-- He had a huge collection of his work; he put it in a vault someplace. I don't know where it is now; if his wife--Silvan died--still has those Lebruns and is doing something with them or not because they still-- He bought up so much from Lebrun's wife, you know, when he was dying at that time, to help her. I think the other one was Margo Leavin or somebody, she handled Lebrun. I think so, some name like that. I'm not sure if that's it. You still see

his name from time to time in art magazines. Well, after all, he can't keep having exhibitions, he's dead. [laughter] They probably will--

When an artist dies, sometimes they go into a whole lapse period. Then one day there's a renaissance, you see, and they bring these people back, and all of a sudden he's born again. It takes time. Because how many people know [William Michael] Harnett? They're just bringing him back. Revitalizing people like that they don't know. Young people know nothing about the arts. I've had them building things, and I say, "Did you ever hear of Ed Kienholz?" They say, "No." I say, "You should know him, he's been working like this for the last thirty or forty years." "Oh really? Wow. That's cool." You know? They think they've got a unique idea. Some of the dealers that are handling their works are the same. They don't know a unique idea from another, the new galleries, you know. They don't know the old artists. They never heard of them. I think that's all the reason for it. Those kinds of things, lack of information. They've been neglected over a period of the last fifteen years.

SMITH: Do you think there's been a change in tastes, artistic tastes, that made--

WAGNER: No. The media just wiped out the art world.

SMITH: The media?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: What do you mean?

WAGNER: Well, in the old days every magazine had an article on art. I don't care if it was Field and Stream, there was something to do with the arts. Television had programs on art. Everybody was interested in art, but now it doesn't exist anymore. There are no collectors anymore like there were. It's all corporate now, decorative. Or very negated art.

SMITH: There was a group that you belonged to in the late forties, early fifties, called Artists Equity?

WAGNER: Uh-huh.

SMITH: I guess that was formed to promote the interests of artists in Southern California. Were you involved in the organizing of that?

WAGNER: No. I was a member. In order to be a member, it was necessary to have been exhibiting in major exhibitions and [to have] had, I think, four or five one-man shows, and things like that. You just couldn't go in off the street. You had to prove yourself to be a practicing artist. It was basically organized to help artists socially and economically. If they had problems financially, hospital bills and things, they would help pay the hospital bills and take up donations. It was also-- They had attorneys, they had advocates for the artists to-- If somebody was

cheating the artist, they'd send out a letter and tighten down the screw on the client to get the money. It was also to help publicize the artist through magazines and to establish exhibitions in museums and galleries for the artist. When I was in it, I think it was-- The president at that time was William Brice.

SMITH: Was this a regional organization only, or was it national?

WAGNER: Oh no, national. The president of the whole organization at that time was [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, a Japanese artist in New York. The regional chapter was William Brice and [Sueo] Serisawa. All of the artists in Los Angeles were members of Equity, and they also were-- They would have meetings. I remember one meeting that was most-- One of the maddest meetings I ever attended was in Frank Perls's gallery in Beverly Hills, when he had this huge gallery where he used to show the impressionists, the French impressionists, and the ashcan school, and all these different artists, you know, from-- People who have just been erased, like [Hobson] Pittman. You don't hear of those people anymore. The meeting actually was assembled in this huge gallery, and there must have been about five hundred artists there from L.A., Southern California, Lorser Feitelson and Oscar Van Young, no names that people know. I remember one of the things that was going on that

really impressed me was that one of the artists got up and he said, "Why is it that we is having to pay to the dealer when we do all the work and we're making the frame, 33.25 percent?" [laughter] That time Oscar Van Young got up and he said, "This guy here, Mr. Perls, he says, 'Oscar, I am wanting from you much thicker paint. Put it on thick. You put on a frame, a good frame, and put the paint on thick.' So I put the paint on thick; I pay for the frame; he sells the painting for about-- I make about $10.50 profit." And Frank Perls got up and he said, "My friends, you must realize that I have this very lavish gallery, and I have all these lights to pay for, and I have these very plush velvet rugs on the floor and they don't-- Your painting sales are not going to pay for them." And it went on and on. It was a wonderful meeting of all of these characters. They were mostly Europeans, you know, 90 percent of them that had lived here, moved here. Marvelous, really old-time artists. None of this messing around.

SMITH: What kind of art were they producing? All kinds?

WAGNER: They were all good painters. They were strong painters, you know. They were always in big exhibitions. Hans Burkhardt, and all of these kinds of people, you know. Strong painters. Hans Burkhardt, he was doing things with bones and skulls collaged onto his paintings

from the cemeteries of San Miguel de Allende. He did the Day of the Dead with all the coffins and the funerals and things. He was Swiss.

SMITH: How did they support themselves?

WAGNER: That's the way they made their money. Well, Burkhardt worked in the studios at that time. He was a scenic designer; quite a few of them worked as scenic designers. They used to have good artists working in the studios, when they had studios, you know, before things got done out on the street with cheap budgets. The time of Cecil B. DeMille and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, everything had to be exact. There were no details that were left out, you know. It wasn't just taking some local drugstore in San Pedro and rearranging it and bringing in a few more bottles, like in today's movies. So the paintings and the scenic designs and all these things were done by these same people, like Eugene Berman and all these different people that were in Equity. Not all of them were in that. Some of them were just painting, you know. Matter of fact, they're having an exhibition right now that just opened. All I know is there's about seven or eight artists in it and it's just opening this week. And it's old Arnold Schiffrin is in it and Pat Benefield.

SMITH: How long were you in Artists Equity?

WAGNER: Well, not too long, probably two or three years.

Then it kind of broke up for a while.

SMITH: Why?

WAGNER: I don't know what happened. They had some kind of problems there with-- I just didn't bother with it anymore. It just fell apart.

SMITH: Was it a political organization?

WAGNER: I'm afraid it was. It had a tendency to be that way. Most of the artists in it around the time of [Joseph] McCarthy were getting messed up in it, you know.

SMITH: So you didn't want to be involved in that or you just--

WAGNER: Well, no, I dropped out before that ever happened. I had moved someplace, or I did something and couldn't go to the meetings, and I just lost interest until-- And after that they didn't operate.

SMITH: It sounds like it didn't fulfill what you wanted it to, I guess, if your interest waned away--

WAGNER: Well, my problem was I never joined anything in my life. I was a very bad member of any clubs or organizations or societies. So that was one of my major problems. I never joined any kind of organizations, so I have no affiliations when I'm supposed to put in an application. Your affiliations with societies or clubs or-- I always leave that blank.

SMITH: Well, in 1949 you moved to Jerome, Arizona.

WAGNER: Uh-huh.

SMITH: How come?

WAGNER: Well, we were living in Hermosa Beach, and I think it was my wife that sort of spurred me to do this, my first wife, Patricia. And my daughters. We'd been to Arizona visiting a year or so before, and we found out that we could go there. About that time the-- It was a mining town and it was closing to mining so it was becoming an abandoned town. I mean a real ghost town, and that's why I guess-- I wanted a change. I was interested in American Indians, and I thought it might-- I'd read a book called **The Masked Gods**, by Frank Waters, and I was very much interested in learning something about them, but I didn't know how I was going to get at that exactly, so we went to Jerome. I bought a truck for $150, a Chevrolet, a ton-and-a-half truck loaded down with all of our things we would need to live there, move there. We just piled everything in and took off. Took painting material, and furniture, and a few beds and things we'd need and left. When we arrived there I thought it would be interesting, maybe we could find a place to live, you know, to rent something. So we asked around and they said a man down here takes care of all the property in Jerome and you go see him. So we walked down there and this gentleman is standing there feeding balustrades into a fireplace and burning them. I

noticed he had a blue dot on the end of his nose. I thought maybe it was coal or something, but I guess it was just a mark on the end of his nose. But it was interesting, a long, pointed nose with a blue dot. We inquired about rentals and he said, "Well, I've got one over here for $200."

And I said, "That's more than I can afford. That's a lot of money. Two hundred dollars? I can't afford that a month. Afford it a month!"

"No, I'll sell you the whole house for $200." It was a big house and it had chandeliers and a spiral staircase. A wonderful place.

SMITH: In good condition?

WAGNER: Yeah, very good. Clean. So we moved in, and my wife started writing and my kids went to school.

SMITH: Where did they go to school?

WAGNER: In Jerome.

SMITH: Oh, the schools were still going then.

WAGNER: Oh, sure. Yeah, Mingus Mountain. It was the only one they had around there. It took care of the whole valley from Clarkdale to Cottonwood, all of the towns. They all went up to Jerome to the big school on the mountain, Mingus Mountain.

SMITH: So you took a leave of absence from your engineering work or did you stop by then?

WAGNER: No, I wasn't working. I just took off.

SMITH: So you must have had quite a bit of money saved up, then.

WAGNER: A little, but not that much. Really, I didn't. I went out there with more or less the idea that I would put maybe a thousand dollars in the bank. I had others, but at least that much in the bank of Clarkdale. When I got there I didn't have my money with me and I needed it from the bank to transfer someplace. I didn't carry it. So I told them at the bank that I needed--I wanted to open a bank account but it was coming from Hermosa Beach. The banker there--the Bank of Arizona it was--said, "Don't worry about it," he said. "How much are you going to put in?" I said, "Well, I'd like to put a thousand in." He said, "Fine, I'll put it in for you. Don't worry about it." And he deposited it in there. [laughter] When the money came, I gave it to him. He just stuck it in there. That was really the kind of country it was, and that's the kind of people that lived there. Altogether different from where we'd come from, you know, that kind of mentality. You'd go to the store and they wouldn't even bother to ring up what you'd bought, you'd go ring it up yourself and put the money in, you know.

SMITH: Was there an artist colony in Jerome?

WAGNER: No. Nothing. There was nothing thereabouts.

There was a church and a priest and a bar; an Indian ran it named Pete who'd give you a drink of frozen whiskey in ice cubes. They'd put the whiskey into the ice containers and then they'd put it in the deep freeze. When they'd bring it out, they'd drop a block of ice in your drink, and it would melt, and wham! Then there were a few stores, a grocery store that was still going, and a hardware, and a post office, all that was there. A jail that fell down the hill, it collapsed and that was over with. Then there was another church that was made out of dynamite boxes and there was a cemetery. And as all the town's people used to say, "Well, we got a lot more people living out in that cemetery than we got here in this town." That's the way they incorporated Jerome. They wanted to incorporate the city and they didn't have enough people to do it. So somebody said, "Use the folks out in the cemetery, get the names off the graves." So they got about five hundred more people out there and it was enough to do that. Dead or alive, they didn't care as long as they were in the town. There were a lot of empty buildings, just big, beautiful buildings. There were a lot of artists that lived around Jerome down in Camp Verde. They had ranches, like Phil Dike and Max Ernst lived there. But he lived out in Sedona.

SMITH: Did you meet Ernst?

WAGNER: Yeah. And his wife, Dorothea Tanning, who was probably, to me, one of the great woman surrealists in Paris. Her father and mother owned the--what was it called--the Kachina Lodge, I believe, in Cottonwood. Manley was their name, Ray Manley. Ray Manley, son, is a photographer for **Arizona Highways**. Some of the best photography in the old days was Ray Manley's photography. Well, that was Max Ernst's mother-in-law and father-in-law. Ray Manley was a painter who was really an old crank who wore a hat all the time, because he had some kind of neuralgia or something and he had to wear it all the time. He hated modern art. He set up the Cottonwood Verde Valley Art Association. He wanted me to come to the meeting. I was about as far removed from their kind of art as you could imagine.

SMITH: What kind of art were they doing?

WAGNER: Oh, pictures of Sedona, you know, red rocks and all of the landscapes. There was another woman who was a very interesting woman, her name was Lilie Umbracht-Brandt. She was from Germany, and she was a very good painter. She did things with the sort of impressionist way. Anyway, finally what happened was that we got enough artists together and we had a meeting with all of the artists of the valley, the old ones and the cranks and all of them. We all decided to make peace with each other, and we opened

up a big gallery in Jerome right next to the post office. It was something like ten thousand square feet.

SMITH: Was it a cooperative venture? Or did somebody put up the money?

WAGNER: No, we didn't have to pay anything for it, it was free. It was in a building that was owned by nobody. [laughter] So we moved in there and tourists would come through there; every once in a while somebody would come up that road and they'd stop. They sold quite a bit of art there, as a matter of fact. It's amazing how much they did sell.

The man who finally ran the place--I'd left that organization--was a-- [He] had a patch over his eye, and he was always drunk and falling into all the paintings. I don't know how he ever lasted as long as he did. He was there for three years. The only good thing he ever did for me was he found my Paul Klee for me.

SMITH: Tell me that story.

WAGNER: Well, Willard Hougland, my friend, lived in Cornville and also hung out in Jerome. Willard Hougland--Have I ever mentioned Willard Hougland?

SMITH: Yes.

WAGNER: Okay, Willard Hougland gave me a Paul Klee about [gestures] this big one time from his collection because he owed me some money, and he gave me this. I still have it,

as a matter of fact. When I moved back to-- When I left Jerome, I left the Paul Klee with the Reardon family, who owned the Northern Arizona Gas and Electric. I left it with the Reardons in their safekeeping until I could pick it up sometime. In the meantime, they got a divorce and all of their property was liquidated and everything was split up. This guy with the patch over his eye was in Flagstaff one day at a rummage sale and he saw this painting. It was underneath a piano on the floor being pressed down, just kind of sticking out. He took it out, and he saw that it was a Paul Klee, he said, "My God, who's this from?" On the back it said, "Property of Gordon Wagner, present from Willard Hougland." And he said, "Where's Wagner? I better take this back to Jerome, he might come through here someday." I was visiting there several years later and there it was. "Look what I got!" And he brought it out.

SMITH: What was this guy's name, the guy with the patch?

WAGNER: Pardon?

SMITH: What was his name?

WAGNER: You mean the guy with the patch?

SMITH: Yeah, the patch.

WAGNER: I don't remember. Shan was his wife, and his name was Roger. I remember that. Roger and Shan. I can't remember the last name. But he found my Paul Klee for me,

so that was beautiful. But in the meantime, I'd left about three works there and he'd walked through two of them, punched holes through them, you know, tripping over them, and they were ruined canvases.

SMITH: Well, what kind of works were you doing in Jerome?

WAGNER: When I first went to Jerome I was kind of doing scraffiti, the scratch work.

SMITH: Let's discuss that a little bit.

WAGNER: I was doing everything around Jerome. I was working buildings and making drawings and sketches of cemeteries. I don't know if you remember the one of the cemetery in Jerome with the figure in the crosses. Then I was fascinated by the old woods again, you see. I was collecting old woods, naturally, and a lot of old stuff like that. I was making scraffiti paintings, but I didn't know exactly what I was going to-- Something had to happen.

SMITH: Something had to happen, you were saying.

WAGNER: Yeah, something had to happen. I was reading a lot of Frank Waters, you know, and I was getting more interested in the American Indians, Navahos and the Hopis and the Pueblos. I was in the wrong district in Arizona to really become involved with them. There were Apaches living right down below us there, and I made friends with the Apaches, a couple of women, Daisy Russell and another one. They were beautiful women; tattoos down their noses like this, you know. They'd walked all the way from Payson, Arizona, when they were little children with their grandfather and their mother and father to work in the smelters in Clarkdale. They'd walked this whole district; it would be close to two hundred miles. They were beautiful people, the Apache women. But that wasn't-- They didn't have what I was looking for. I was looking for imagery, for myths and legends, and all of that sort of thing that I wanted to get into, you see. Frank Waters was talking about it because an extra-- Frank Waters was to me about the same as Henry Miller was to me: Justification for my living. He was a hero, Frank Waters.

SMITH: So you were looking for the Navaho-Hopi-Pueblo Indian connection. You then left Jerome to find that?

WAGNER: Well, I knew that Jerome wouldn't be the answer so I drove up one time, my wife and I drove out to the Navaho reservation and to the Hopis'. I was very impressed with the feeling of the place. At that time the Indians were still pretty much out there on dirt roads, two ditches and high-centered roads and no pavement, just wagons and beautiful people in their velveteen and the families in their hogans. It hadn't been taken over by industry at that time. There was a lot of illness there at that time, a lot of eye diseases and--what was the disease--tuberculosis, they used to get that all the time. They lost a lot of Indians to that. The mortality rate--Children died because they wouldn't go to the hospital for the births, a lot of the women, you know. It was a whole different place then. They had two hospitals and some would go. They had one in Tuba City and another one in Reams Canyon. It wasn't until much later that things started to develop for them. Of course, it's for a better life for them, but it took away part of the romance of what I was looking for. But not when I was there. It was still beautiful, you know, pure.

SMITH: So then you decided to move up there?

WAGNER: Well, yeah, that's what happened. The house in Jerome had a little accident and fell down the cliff.

SMITH: What?

WAGNER: Yeah. [laughter] So the decision was set.

SMITH: It fell down the cliff?

WAGNER: Well, a lot of houses fell down the cliff in Jerome. Whole buildings would just go over in the night. After all, the city had eighty-eight tunnels, miles of tunnels, underneath it, and they'd just drop out; a whole street would disappear, you know.

SMITH: So that happened while you were there?

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, I wasn't there at that moment. While I was there, but I wasn't there. I sort of made the decision, Oh, let's go to the Navaho and see what we could do. So we moved to Tuba City, which was the first town on the reservation after Cameron. I stayed there in a trader's. He had like a motel in the back. It was really like an old auto camp, you know, just bungalows and wooden buildings. So I stayed there and I worked and made drawings and read and thought. Reading Frank Waters; I was still with him. He hadn't written such books yet as **The Book of the Hopi**, or any of those. He'd written some, like **The Man Who Killed the Deer**, which was really a Taos Indian, Frank Zamora, who's a friend of ours, incidentally. **The Man Who Killed the Deer.** But he hadn't written any of that, he was still working in-- Why I liked him, I guess, was because he had a comparative way of looking at things. He would combine the Navaho philosophy

with the Pueblo philosophy and their myths and their symbols. And he would combine Carl Jung and his imagery within it, and he would combine the Mount Maru in India through the-- He'd compare all these different philosophies and teachings all related to the American Indian and all the symbology, which really intrigued me. And the Christianity. He didn't forget any aspect of belief. The way he crossed through them was a beautiful entwining of writing. He would explain the myths to a point, but then he would give you references to books that were written, short little pamphlets on myths and things from the University of New Mexico and from [Mary C.] Wheelwright and from [Ben and John] Weatherhill, and all these people, archaeologists and anthropologists and their writings, and whatnot. You could study all these things and then you could come in direct contact with some Indians. If you ask an Indian anything they will never tell you a thing. But if you don't ask them, they'll just unravel everything for you. I found that out very early in living there. Finally, I found a hogan that I could live in, and I spent my time painting.

I went into all the myths, the House of the Sun Children, and the Beauty Way, and the Red Ant Way, and the Angry Inside Way, and the world turned itself upside down and the water ran through the kivas, and emergence myths,

and the Water Spirit, and the Coyote. All of these made for great paintings that had to do with an abstract way of looking at things. Not from [Frederick] Remington's or [Charles Marion] Russell's or from the Indian way, but from my own experiences. All of the things that I'd already learned in my life were all becoming completely evolved into these paintings.

SMITH: You mentioned once that your paintings from this period, none of them are nonobjective. Yet if you look at them just as a visual experience they look awfully nonobjective.

WAGNER: That's right. If you look at them that way they look nonobjective, but they certainly aren't, because I didn't put anything in there that wasn't symbolic to a certain situation. Probably the atmosphere, and the light, and the dark, and the fires, and the earth, and the spirits, all of these things come out of myself from the inside as I related them, as I was reading and seeing and hearing all these things. That probably was the reason they looked that way. But it's very interesting, because I'd asked a few Indians what they got out of it and they got what I was saying. They got the myth. A few of them didn't. I mean, after all, not everybody in the world is sensitive, you know, but the sensitive ones certainly got it.

SMITH: You weren't painting in any style at all reminiscent of Navaho sandpainting.

WAGNER: Nothing like that, not a thing. But I was using some of their images.

SMITH: In what way? Would you explain that?

WAGNER: Well, like the yei's. The yei's are the long, skinny people, you know. But I certainly didn't use them like they used them. I had them maybe suspended in the sky with part atmosphere, you know.

SMITH: You were talking about the yei's?

WAGNER: Well, the yei's are the long figures that you find on blankets and things, you know, with the corn, and the pollen, and the pools, and the rainbow, and the guards, and the lightening bars, and the walking sticks, and all sorts of things. But I'd never used them in that way; I used them maybe as an atmospherical form where they would be just maybe a symbol, where there would be a piece of them, you know, coming down disconnected, but never as a hard, stylized sandpainting or blanket design. Ever. Because they weren't in design. My pieces were pure painting, you know, and very plastically moving.

SMITH: At this time you met a couple of Indian artists or priests or whatever?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: There was Otto Semptewa that you met while you

were--

WAGNER: Otto Semptewa was a Hopi and a beautiful person. He always rode around on a burro. He was about five feet tall and he wore bangs and bobbed hair with a headband and was friendly to everyone. His talent was he was a kachina maker. He made some of the most beautiful kachinas for the dance and for the children of that time. He gave me a wolf kachina, and he gave me a butterfly, and he gave me a long-hair kachina one time. I really liked him a lot. And he was a friend of another woman--this was in New Oraibi where he lived--and she talked him into [having] us rent a house from him to move into the pueblo of the Hopis. We lived there for about a year with Otto. He taught me a lot about things that I would never possibly be able to tell you because they're all secrets. Indians say, "Indian tell white man, white man tell world."

And I remember one time--I'll never forget it--there was a governor of Taos Pueblo who was a close friend of Virginia [Copeland Wagner's] and mine. To tie the story together, he always brought us corn, firewood. He'd bring a truckload for us in Taos. Not Hopi, but just to get to the story. So he says, "Gordon, you see rocks over there?" Big rocks, all kinds of big face shapes. He says, "You know who they are?" I say no. "They all white men who never learned."

One day I was very much interested in the Pueblo because they use a patron saint, you know, related to their own Indian secrets. And I said, "Pete, how do your patron saints fit into your Indian myth and legends and all your dances and all of your life? How do they do that?" He said, "Gordon, I tell you anything you want to know about Indian way. But saints? They are a secret." So I really disappointed him one time when I brought him a little card. I said, "Have you ever read **Butler's Book of Saints?**" He said, "Where's that?" I said, "You can get it in the library in Taos. It's all about saints. Anything you want to know about saints is there." "No!" he said. [laughter]

But to get to Otto Semptewa, he told me secrets. He took me places and showed me things, like all of the Indians, that I don't ever want to tell anybody. It would be a terrible thing because they wouldn't want me to; I've sworn to secrecy with them, you know. I can't do that ever, to anybody. Even to Virginia, I don't tell her.

SMITH: What about David Monongi?

WAGNER: He lived in Hotevilla. David's a wonderful little man who one time tried to marry Virginia, my wife. [laughter] My second wife, my now wife, not the wife I had before. She's dead. He tried to marry Virginia, and Virginia used to go and stay with him a lot. David was a

traditional Hopi. He was one of the leaders of the Traditional Indian Land and Life Committee which was-- In the Hopi they have the progressives and they have the traditionals. One wants to make everything very modern and do away with the traditional dances and all that sort of thing. Materialist values: television in the houses, and cars. While the traditionals want it to to be the old way, with the dances and the way they have lived for two thousand years on that mesa. David is a-- At the time of the hippie movement David was a hero, because he was so friendly and he loved all the pretty girls and all of the hippie girls, and they used to invite him everyplace. David became blind by a wood chip in his eye from chopping wood when Virginia was there one time; it hit him in the eye and he practically lost his vision. But he was a-- He believed in flying saucers, and he said when the world ends the Gourd of Ash will fall. That's a Hopi prophecy. That's Chief [Dan] K'achongva who prophesied that, that the Gourd of Ash, which is the atomic bomb, would come. But in the meantime, David and his group go in parts of Arizona and New Mexico, and they communicate with the flying saucer people, they tell me. I've never gone with them, but they have this thing going. They have lots of magic, and they have lots of myths and legends and they live a life that is so far different from any life--

We couldn't possibly live like the Hopis. In the first place, you have to be a Hopi to be a Hopi. Even in school in New Oraibi, when Harold Jones was the teacher with his wife, Monday morning the students were Hopis. There was no possible way to change them; they were drawing masks, and they were drawing their colors and their kachinas. Tuesday afternoon they could talk to him about American English and arithmetic and spelling. Wednesday they were full-time Americans. Thursday they were really up there, they were really doing-- Friday they were thinking about being Hopis. And Saturday and Sunday they were back home again, so they had to go through Monday again to get away from the Hopis. The Hopi culture was so strong it kept-- The school tried to pull them into thinking the way we do, and the Hopis wanted it the way they wanted it, so the kids were in between in this Indian school. David Monongi, he's one of the ones who was keeping these kids from-- He didn't want them to be like white man, you know. David Monongi and Thomas Banyakia went to the Indian school in Riverside [California]. They'd been there, they knew what it was, and they didn't see that they needed it. They wanted to go back and take it back and tell the people, "Be a Hopi."

Hopi means "peace"; that word means peace. And Semptewa: tewa means "sun." Every morning they get up and

the first thing they do, at four thirty, five o'clock in the morning, they all stand facing east and wait for the sun to rise, and they say their prayers. We took David Monongie and Tom Banyakia and Jack the Snake Priest down to the beach with Yogi Bhajan, who was a Sikh, and he looked down on these Indians like they were some kind of scum of the earth. He was an India Indian. He never realized that they were the leaders of the Hopi. And he could care less. Bhajan was sitting there [mumbles] and the Indians all got up and went down on the beach. They took out their corn pollen in a little pipe, and they would chant [chants], and they would blow out a corn pollen into the ocean. Every corn pollen that went out into the ocean, floated out into the ocean, it was a prayer for peace around the world. That corn pollen would follow the--and peace to the whole world through the corn. Bhajan's up there chanting a mantra, totally egomaniac, and these three men were so spiritually beautiful, just blowing out their kernels and praying for peace to the world. What a difference. We even rode in Thomas Banyakia's old car, a great, huge machine, flopping down Beverly Hills with three Indians in the front and Virginia and I and the yogi in the back. It was a picture to see. Going through Beverly Hills on Wilshire to the beach. [laughter]

SMITH: Are there Navaho artists or people that you met

that you--

WAGNER: Oh yeah, I met-- One of my favorite Navaho artists is the father of R. C. [Rudolph Carol] Gorman. RC is the one who's getting all the credit, you know. He does the drawings and lives in Taos. He started when he was young as a Navaho, and he drives a pink Mercedes, and he has "Who is R. C. Gorman?" on the bumper sticker, you know. All kinds of--Andy Warhol crowd he got into. Where Carl Gorman, his father, is just exactly the opposite. He lives in Window Rock, and he paints myths and legends. His name is Iniiniyanibie in Navaho. I met him in Silvan Simone's gallery. When I was showing my Navaho works with Silvan Simone years ago, Carl Gorman was showing his Navaho works with Silvan Simone, and that's where we met. Carl Gorman teaches Navaho mythology and healing and herbs at UC [University of California] Davis up north. He lives in Window Rock. He's one of the most beautiful artists. RC is a commercial artist and Carl is an artist's artist and a true Indian artist. It would be like comparing the difference between--one of the great Indian artists that I love is T. C. Cannon, he's an artist artist, and putting him up against Charles Loboma. When I was in the reservation, on the Hopi, Charles Loboma was a school teacher in the Terreva Day School in Pallaco. And his wife, Otellie Loboma, was there and they were beautiful.

He was a thin, beautiful man, and he was doing real sensitive pottery, so thin you could see through it; completely unlike any of the Hopi pottery. Now, he became very commercial, and he started designing all this fashionable jewelry for the jet set in New York, and whatnot. He makes turquoise rings one inch wide, the inside is turquoise and the outside is gold. He reverses it. And costume jewelry, and all this slick commercial-- He lives in Hotevilla. Matter of fact, he lives about-- actually, if you measured blocks--a block away from David Monongi. He tried to marry Virginia and take her out to the mesa also, when Virginia was in Santa Fe, but Otellie was a very close friend of Virginia's, and she wasn't about to hold still for that. Otellie's actually not living with Charles anymore. Charles Loboma: it means "beautiful" or "good morning," the word. So she lives in Santa Fe, and she's in the Indian school in Santa Fe teaching. But those are the kind of-- They're either real commercial or they are still artist's artists, you know?

SMITH: What were you searching for in the Hopi/Navaho ways?

WAGNER: I was looking for-- I was very romantic about the Indian and I wanted to be an Indian. I could have become an Indian out there. It would have been easy for me to become one. I felt the land. I felt the people. I felt

the dust, and the dirt, and the sand, and the winds, and the elements, and the hardships, and eating over wood fires, and no water, and hauling water in wagons, and the traders, and the people, and the joy and the humor, of the people. They were so-- Navahos have such a wit you just can't believe it. They'd give you their last nickel. They're like gypsies. The Hopis wouldn't give you anything and then they'd spend all afternoon telling you how great they are. But the Navahos won't say anything at all until you do something funny, and then they just absolutely collapse. And they are so witty. If they see that you want to speak their language, they laugh and make jokes and, "Oh come on, let's go over here," and they take you, you know.

SMITH: Did you learn Navaho?

WAGNER: Well, I could get along. You never know their language that well. I mean, kind of a "Me Tarzan, you Jane" Navaho, yeah.

SMITH: But if you heard storytellings, would you be able to follow the stories as they were--

WAGNER: Well, if I read it through phonology in a-- I had to get a-- There are several phonology books on Navahos. Because there are not that many actual words in Navaho. I think it's a very small vocabulary, but the alphabet has got like I think forty-two words in it. I think there are

forty-two words in the alphabet--or letters. There are tl's and thl's, and there are sl's and lit's, and lis's, and z's that are zhe and z's that are zz and you have to know which are which. But I could communicate on a normal conversation, you know. They'd laugh and laugh and laugh when I'd talk to them. They'd say, "Don't try so hard. You do; you do. Don't try so hard." [laughter]

SMITH: You have a painting, The Navaho Night Chant, that got written up quite a bit. Could you describe that, what you were trying to do in that?

WAGNER: The Yeibichai?

SMITH: The Yeibichai, right.

WAGNER: Well, that painting was done when I was in a peyote ceremony. What it was, it's the actual ceremony--The yeibichai is the healing ceremony. It's a nine-day ceremony and it starts out with first sweating the patient in the sweathouse and into all the directions, and the dance, and it goes on. It's very complex. I don't want to tell you their rituals because I'm not supposed to do that. But it's very complex, and it lasts for nine days. Everybody comes to the yeibichai from all over the reservation, because anybody who can afford a yeibichai--They have all this meat and food, and everybody gets in on it, and everybody gets a little bit off of it healingwise, you know. The painting actually was looking down from a

sector of the sky at the central sweathouse, and then the sweathouse to the east and the sweathouse to the north, and one to the west-- No, south, east, north; I don't have the one to the west. The three of them in juxtaposition with the fires down below, and the wagons with-- An aerial view is what it is, at night, and you can see the wagons coming on the road, just sections of it. On the top they have, hovering over the whole thing, the Nitch'ijí people. And the Nitch'ijí people are capable of flying. They come from the skunk; they have the tails of skunks, and that gives them a sort of a propelling mechanism so that they can drop down over the whole yeibichai. And there's Hastyéeltsi, and there's Hastyésini, and there's Hastyéyalti, and there's Hastyéhogan. There's another four. They're at different levels in this painting. If you look at this painting very close through a reducing glass, which is reduction, you will see it layers about seven to eight levels deep, this painting. Like looking underwater. But you can't see it if you just look at it without that, because you've got to really see it right. It gives you three dimensions because--

SMITH: Now, how did you achieve that?

WAGNER: I didn't. The painting did. I was painting it through peyote, and I just painted it. I didn't have anything to do with it at all; I was just there. I don't

know how it happened, but I've never been able to get that feeling again. But it actually is about six levels down, with these people and these different suspended levels. If you look close at this painting you'll see that. Some day I'll bring out my reducing glass and let you look so you can really see it.

SMITH: Now, were you able to sell most of your paintings from this period?

WAGNER: All of them. All of that series. Two hundred and twenty-five. I only kept two.

SMITH: Which were the two that you kept?

WAGNER: **The Yeibichai** and **The Squaw Fight** on the trading post floor where the two squaws are fighting.

SMITH: Was that based on something you saw?

WAGNER: Yeah, actually saw. I was in the trading post and they were fighting there, and the blankets and the velveteen are all spinning, and their turquoise conches. I was up on the top of the trading post. It was on a Saturday when all of the Navahos come to the trading post. It's their only communication. It's their newspaper. They come and talk about what happened over here, and they get all the information, you know. They also get their cigarettes for the week, because the trader has a box of tobacco and he has rolling papers. So they come in and they buy a can of corned beef and they roll a

couple of cigarettes. They stack those up, and they go out and talk for a while; come back and they'll buy something else and they roll some more cigarettes. And they spend all day. By the time they're ready to go home they've got enough cigarettes for the week and they've learned the news. It's a beautiful sight to see all this velveteen and all this color and the beautiful men with their turquoises and all their jewelry sitting out there in these reddish--it's alizarin and crimson--and the color of their faces is almost a deep purple. You see them all sitting along these trading posts with their children the same, you know. It's a really exciting color. I did one of a trading post, the Cowsprings Trading Post, one time, the whole thing with the wagons and everything. I kept the painting after I'd painted it exactly twelve minutes and it was sold right away.

SMITH: How much were you selling your paintings for?

WAGNER: Then?

SMITH: Yeah, then.

WAGNER: Not much. A couple of hundred dollars for a big one.

SMITH: Was that considered a lot of money back then?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Did you have any patrons or "angels" at that time?

WAGNER: No. Well, I had a few people who bought my

paintings, but no patrons, no. When I came back I had-- Simone sold a lot of my Indian pieces, and another man in Manhattan Beach, Russ [Russell] Hickson, of the Hickson Gallery, he did quite a bit with that too. He sold a lot for me. I had some shows with them in the Phoenix Art Museum beforehand.

SMITH: At this time you met Carl Jung? While you were living in Arizona?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: How did--

WAGNER: Well, he bought two paintings from me.

SMITH: Two of your Navajo series?

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, they were sort of-- They were more what I would say, more Jungian. You know, the Mount Maru and the sides of the mountain.

SMITH: So how did you come to meet him?

WAGNER: He was studying out there, sandpaintings. He was very much into the mandalas, and he took quite a few sandpaintings. He wasn't there for very long.

SMITH: Did you have a chance to talk to him about--

WAGNER: Well, not very much because he didn't have time for that, but his daughter was around and I talked to her.

SMITH: Who was that? What's her name?

WAGNER: One of his daughters.

SMITH: Were you later influenced by-- Did you read his

books? Were you influenced by him, would you say?
WAGNER: I suppose so; you might say so. I always loved Carl Jung, and all of the aspects of Carl Jung, from his alchemy, psychology and alchemy, through the mandalas and his superconscious. All of these things. I've always been interested in the higher consciousness. So I think that I was affected by him quite a bit. Even to this day I think I'm affected by him a lot. Especially when it came in those days. After all, what were they talking about, the Indians? They were talking about cosmic harmony. They were talking about duality in universe and universal harmony through the four directions or the six directions. Carl Jung was-- That's what he was all about, right? But they'd had it, you know. And everything they do, the Navahos, is in four directions. They don't tell you anything if they don't want to tell you. You have to ask them four times and then they'll tell you the truth. They'll lie to you three times, but the fourth time they can't because they're boxed in, you see, by the four directions. And you never point because that could give them some kind of bad energy. You never point, because the direction-- But all of these things Jung was paralleling and using, the Navahos and the Hopis had had for years.
SMITH: You refer to those paintings usually as the Navaho series. Did you do any paintings that are more

specifically Hopi?

WAGNER: I did a few, a couple of kiva paintings and the whipping dance. I still have that. The whipping kachinas, where they go around at night and scare all the people and children and run them into their pueblo, and they get all the white--

SMITH: Was there something more-- The Navaho material stimulated you more? Was that why you did so many--

WAGNER: More of it, to a point. Because the Hopi is a really-- That system is so complex, you know. And there's a lot of dance. And their legends are not parallel at all. It's very interesting. Because Hopis have nothing to do with Navahos. Navahos come from Manchuria, you know, Athabasca up there. The Hopis are descendants of the Maya and the Incas, so it's in the other direction. And the Pueblos, too, in New Mexico. So the cultures are altogether different, their emergence myths, the end of the world, and the great floods. They were there in both, but the descriptions are entirely different. How they got here, and how the flood happened, and when the world ends, and all these things, they are not parallel at all. So I find that the Hopi is more exciting, actually, because they have all their dances and all their kachinas, superhuman beings, you know, and the dolls and their art. The Navahos don't have much of that. They just have this-- They're

nomadic people; the Hopis live in pueblos like a community. The Navahos are sheep people; Hopis are corn people. There's no parallel between them at all. Completely different culture.

SMITH: How were you supporting yourself during this time?

WAGNER: At that time?

SMITH: Yeah, while you were living in Arizona.

WAGNER: Well, I became so poor that I had to borrow money from the Navahos to get back to California. When I took my show to Phoenix, to the museum-- I think I mentioned once to you about the old truck. I loaded it all up, and I'd been invited to have a one-man show in Phoenix, in the [Phoenix Art] Museum. I took an Indian with me and we loaded the whole truck up. We started down to Phoenix bouncing along over all the roads. By the time I got down to the Black Canyon, which is south of Prescott about fifty miles, I went dancing down this corduroy road like this, and the paintings all flopping, and I shifted the gear and the gearshift came out in my hand. So I had to drive almost forty-five miles in second gear into Phoenix. This was at about three in the morning, or four, I guess. Arrived in Phoenix about six thirty or seven. We were so tired that we just fell asleep on the lawn in front of the museum. Woke up to the fire department hosing us down; they thought we were some drunks out there and they wanted

to get us off the lawn. The director came out, "You can't do that! This is my man for the next exhibition." [laughter] So I had to trade that old truck in and I got a pickup. The Indian I brought with me, he came to the show and people said, "What do you think of this show, you being Indian?" He says, "Wagner say, only two kind of work: good art, bad art. I like. Good art." [laughter]

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JANUARY 10, 1987

SMITH: Well, we're in the gallery at Angel's Gate Cultural Center. Your retrospective show is here. I wanted to start by talking first about the assemblages that you chose to put in this show. Did you have access to all the assemblages that you have made over the years?

WAGNER: I'm not quite sure where they all are. I know who owns them. I have no idea where they've moved. But most of the major pieces I can pretty much recall who has them and where they are, yeah.

SMITH: So you were able to select the pieces that were the most meaningful to you for this show?

WAGNER: Yeah. I tried to take pieces that were from the very beginning of my assemblages, like I have this one called From the Sea; it's a wall piece, a wall hanging. It's very linear in composition, using weathered woods from the sea and not touching them, not painting them, only using them as they are, the colors and the polychrome, in the composition. That would be 1950. Then I wanted to get a few that were the same kind of polychrome wood, but the three-dimensional standing pieces. Most of those pieces in the exhibition are called Piece of Pieces from the Sea, which are like two sentinels in this exhibition. And then I wanted to get the interpretation of a couple of pieces

that would relate more to death, which is part of my early expression, so I have the **Between Heaven and Hell**, where the purgatory is on the bottom with the devil looking on, heaven on the top with the grave marker of "EP," whoever that is. I found it in a cemetery in Mexico, and the coffin handle I found in a cemetery in Guanajuato. The coffin itself has bones in it to suggest maybe a poor soul laying in rest there, and lifting the coffin lid, you read "gentleman." And the stones, the ring of stones hanging, are-- In Mexico, when a man passes a cross on the road, usually somebody's buried there or a symbol of that, of an accident. They throw stones on the cross, and each stone represents a prayer to help this man remove himself from down below to get to heaven. That piece was done in Mexico with that idea in mind.

Over on the other side here we have another piece that symbolizes death almost, old shoes from the desert that are decapitated and dehydrated to the point of [being] almost changed into a different form. The lantern on the very top with the rag sticking out of it is a lantern that was in the Deauville Club in Santa Monica. When the Deauville Club burned down, the drapery and the lamp and everything melted all together. I found this piece with this ball of shoes underneath it. This very polychromed Greek Corinthian style column puts it all together about the

height of a man, and I call him Sir Deauville. Man of the city, would that be? Sir Deauville.

SMITH: Of the city of Deauville.

WAGNER: He also sort of looks like a guard that might be standing outside of the Vatican or something.

SMITH: City of water, perhaps.

WAGNER: With this rag flying back off the top of his head.

SMITH: What about the one behind you, the HTG 26?

WAGNER: Well, HTG 26 is a strange piece. HTG is a tag I found someplace, probably has to do with cataloging nails, or bolts, or screws, or something. But HTG meaning I have the three different symbols in there: I have the Taoist bell down below as the base, very Chinese; and the post flaming up into the dish, the symbols of the Hebrew Pesah or Passover; and a Christian cross in there. So HTG is Hebrew, Tao, and God twenty-six times. The whole metamorphosis of this thing came together without the label. They all fit somehow. They weren't meant to be together, but they just happened to be on that piece. It all worked out that way.

SMITH: There's also the mandala effect.

WAGNER: It is sort of a mandala with the iron spikes around it, from piers and wharfs, those are. They're very bent and twisted from the water.

SMITH: Kind of a Medusa effect.

WAGNER: Yeah, almost.

SMITH: Well, most of the pieces in the show that are assemblages are from the period '60, '61, '62, '63, a couple from '58. So was that-- In that period of your life, were you really focusing on assemblages? Did that come together for you as--

WAGNER: Totally.

SMITH: Totally.

WAGNER: Except for a few paintings--

SMITH: Which we'll get into.

WAGNER: --that I was trying to fit in between. But starting in the fifties with the piece **From the Sea**, it's called, and several like that, I worked for a while. Then I did other pieces, standing pieces. But I realized assemblage was where I wanted to be in the sixties, so I was fully into it except that every now and then I wanted to paint again. My paintings at that time sort of took on the linearity of my assemblages in that period. Because when I went to Mexico, you know, I got into the painting.

SMITH: Well, a piece like **Sir Deauville**, the way you've described it, the shoes you found first-- How did the idea for regrouping the column, the ball with the shoes, and the lantern with the melted curtain come together?

WAGNER: I have no idea how that works. It just comes together.

SMITH: But did you have all the elements already and then you saw how to put them together? Or did you get a concept, a vision, and then go out and look for the things?
WAGNER: No, no vision. I had a lot of old shoes from the desert, Mojave Desert, and I made the ball to put the shoes into the cage to fit them. When the whole thing came together, I said, "I think it would be beautiful to have that lamp on the top of it all." And when I looked at it, the first thing that came to my mind for the title was Sir **Deauville** because of the Deauville Club. It was a sort of homage to the poor Deauville Club. I loved that place. I used to take my girl dancing there when I was young. They had a wonderful bar; it was a French bar. The whole thing was dungeons and streets and things, and it looked very underworld, you know? I still think about that old bar in the Deauville Club. It's too bad it burned down. It was a place where you could go right in off the street; you didn't have to be a member, none of that sort of fanciness. But they had nice music. It was very romantic, on the ocean, on the promenade, in Santa Monica.
SMITH: Stepping back, a little back, the impulse to assemblage and-- What kind of assemblage work was being done in California at this time? Had it already begun to take off as a style?
WAGNER: There were all sorts of assemblages being done,

and it was a very exciting era. **Artforum** was picking it up, and **Art in America** was picking it up, and all of the various big national magazines were picking up West Coast assemblage, which would have been like [Edward] Kienholz and George Herms, Wallace Berman, Chuck [Charles] Frazier, Ben Talbert, Fred Mason, and Tony Berlant.

SMITH: And what about yourself? Was your work being--

WAGNER: Oh sure, I was involved with it right with them.

SMITH: Was it being picked up and noticed in the periodicals?

WAGNER: Oh yeah. It was amazing. **Artforum** then was on the West Coast, San Francisco, so naturally they sped right into it. [Arthur] Secunda was the editor then, and he really loved assemblage, so he was always helping the assemblage artists to get space in the magazine. It was an exciting time. And nobody recognized it, you know, the stiff collectors of formalized drawings and [those] looking for things on the investment, like the 355,000 illegal Dalís. Those sorts of things. When I had-- My first assemblage show I think was in the Silvan Simone Gallery.

SMITH: When was that?

WAGNER: Well, I had it combined with painting, my first assemblage show, probably about 1960. With painting, the two together. Everybody loved my paintings, but they wouldn't even look at my assemblages, you know. They said,

"What's this doing here? Who does that belong to?" I remember George Herms came to the opening, and I remember him running around and looking at all the assemblages, and he wasn't interested in the paintings at all. They were abstract expressionist paintings I was showing at the time, big ones. But my assemblages were just written off, except that Arthur Millier, who was a critic on the [Los Angeles] Times, he was more interested in the assemblages than he was in the paintings. He gave me a wonderful review about that, telling about my work finding these objects and the poetic connotations they had.

SMITH: You were mentioning before there's protest assemblage, there's poetic assemblage. Where does your work fit in?

WAGNER: Poetic.

SMITH: Were you doing any protest assemblage?

WAGNER: No, I was into poetic. Later, I did protest assemblage, but in the beginning it was poetic, pure poetry.

SMITH: Could you define what you mean? What is a protest assemblage? What's a poetic assemblage? What's the difference?

WAGNER: Poetic assemblage is using materials and objects to feel something without it being out of random objects. Yet the composition is almost like an amulet or a fetish.

Protest is just exactly the opposite of that: it's taking dolls' heads and jamming them into vicious places, floating things on bowls of wine, heads of babies, putting children into traps, toys into bear traps, and feathers, burning them and putting them through gross situations and agony and showing disaster and wrapping them all up. Like our society was trying to strangle the flower children is a perfect example of what I was protesting against. I made plenty of protest pieces against the establishment in the sixties. From bulldozers to the hunger and the big business and the money people, and the greed and the lust and the hates and the fears, all of these things we were protesting against. When we were in Watts, right after the Watts riot, we made a whole series just on what we found in Watts.

SMITH: Now who's--

WAGNER: We were sympathizing with the people of Watts for what happened, how they were being put down. We used the actual burned objects and burned pieces, melted things, all twisted. They were all in this exhibition called Sixty-six Signs in Neon, which was established by Noah Purifoy. That exhibition was at UCLA, and it was in San Francisco and Seattle, in the museum of modern art, Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian [Institution].

Then there was the other sort of assemblage, there was

the humorous. Getting away from protests, and getting away from the poetic, and getting more into the juxtaposition of interesting objects that make puns and set themselves up as a humorous object. Then there was the erotic, the love objects; went through all that. Then there were the spiritual assemblages, which were more of the mandala and using spiritual symbolism like hearts and sunbursts and light and color to give you that energy.

SMITH: And you did all of these different types?

WAGNER: All different kinds. I've done that. I went through everything at that time, in the sixties, from the smallest, tiniest matchbox--I've done assemblages inside of a matchbox--to huge pieces, walls of them. In fact, I have a set of assemblages that you've never seen that are over ten feet high and about nine feet wide in Echo Park. I could never move them from where I moved from, so I moved them across the street, and set them up in my friend's garden. They had to be rebuilt when my friend's tree fell on them in a big wind storm maybe four years ago and it collapsed right on top of them. So I rebuilt them, and they're still standing. I call them **The Five Sentinels.**

SMITH: Now, where are they located? At a friend's house in Echo Park?

WAGNER: Echo Park. In a friend's, Yelka Perachitch's house at the end of Effie Street.

SMITH: What was the aesthetic appeal of junk for you, what people in general would consider junk: abandoned shoes, and so forth?

WAGNER: What?

SMITH: What was the aesthetic appeal of junk for you and other artists at the time?

WAGNER: I don't think it will ever change. It's really the only place where you really understand about civilization is in a dump. You can go there and you can find things. It tells you whole histories of towns and people that lived there before you. Some people like to play golf, and other people like to play bridge, and other people like to do these things, but there are people who like to go to dumps and discover wonderful things. Not new dumps. These dumps today where they bulldoze everything under immediately, full of garbage and food and trash, that's not what I mean by a dump. I mean, if you go to the desert, where things have been lying there for a hundred years, you'll find an old toy or an old box or a piece of metal with flowers in it and designs. In those days they were very elaborate, machines and things of that nature, they etched things and they took time. They made things with flowers in them and ornaments. It's an experience. It's like going fishing. Why does a person sit there all day and wait for a fish? It's the same thing. You go to

the dump, you almost visualize the piece you're going to find. But you always find so much, boxes full. You bring them back in your car and get them home, and they don't look the same. They don't look the same as they looked in the dump. They've lost something, because the light of the desert, the purples and the violets and the greens, the light there gives that metal a whole different color than when you get it back into a civilized situation. So you can eliminate about 40 percent of your findings and you put them over in another box, FS: For Students, and you can give them away to people who are doing the same sort of thing; or FT: For Trade. You keep a box for trading; you keep one for your students. You never throw anything away because you can make something new out of it every time. So that's the intrigue of going to a dump. If you've never been to a dump you've missed something.

SMITH: Now, what do you mean by a dump? What's--

WAGNER: I mean a dump dump. I mean a place like--

SMITH: Where did you go?

WAGNER: Red Mountain Dump was the best dump that I've ever been to.

SMITH: Where's that?

WAGNER: Now, that's on the 395 highway between Adelanto and-- What's that town there? Well, it goes over to Red Rock Canyon, the back road. That town was Red Mountain.

It was an abandoned town. It used to be called "Inn City" because it used to be little tin houses and buildings with all prostitutes for the miners that were in the mines there, because it was a gold-mining town.

SMITH: Now, what part of California is this?

WAGNER: It's in the Mojave Desert.

SMITH: Mojave Desert. Along the San Bernardino Mountains side or the Sierra side?

WAGNER: If you went over the Cajon Pass, instead of going to Victorville, you would go off toward Valyermo, toward Palmdale. The town is called Adelanto. You pass that and way over on the east of that is Calico. Keep going. Randsburg is the town the other side of Red Mountain. All these old buildings are still there from the mining days, all the structure. And a dump I would say approximately four miles long and maybe half a mile wide and about-- In a canyon, deep. No more; they bulldozed the whole thing over. In 1971 I went out there to the dump and it was gone. Not one single thing left. They just erased it right off--

SMITH: Was the mining town still active when you were going up there?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: How long had it been--

WAGNER: Oh, probably 1920.

SMITH: And you went to the dump that was where the-- A little town where the prostitutes were?

WAGNER: Yeah, Inn City, Red Mountain, the dump for that city. You could find-- You can't imagine what you could find there.

SMITH: What did you find there?

WAGNER: Everything! Half of the things that I use. The shoes all come from Red Mountain. Those nails came from Red Mountain. Probably the wood. A lot of these things came from Red Mountain.

SMITH: And what piece is that?

WAGNER: This is **The Gameless Game.**

SMITH: And what are those? Those look--

WAGNER: Everything. They're spindles from furniture, and they're different kinds of--

SMITH: Doorknobs?

WAGNER: --shapes. So they're all sitting on this sort of a framework as a chess game. But nothing moves. It's a game you can't play. That's why I call it **The Gameless Game.** There's no way to play it. Because it's for people who don't play games.

SMITH: Was it important for you in an assemblage that people be able to recognize what the object was in its previous life?

WAGNER: When?

SMITH: In an assemblage?

WAGNER: You mean, will they recognize the parts?

SMITH: Yeah. Is it important to you that they be able to recognize the parts?

WAGNER: No, no, not at all. That's not it, not it at all. I'm not interested in the object from an independent standpoint, I'm interested from the total concept of how the objects work together. Not one object, no.

SMITH: But in **Sir Deauville**, the fact that that's a lantern is not an important part of the design?

WAGNER: It's a head.

SMITH: Well, it is a head, but it was once a lantern.

WAGNER: But that's not important. It's a wonderful lantern, but it's still a head and it works as a whole. Otherwise by itself it's just a lantern with a rag, something to throw away in the dump, right?

SMITH: Or in **HTG 26**, the nails: It's not important that those are nails?

WAGNER: Yeah, but they're rays, rays! But now, if you throw them back in the Red Mountain Dump, probably spikes for mine buildings.

SMITH: But in **Between Heaven and Hell**, it is important that you see the coffin as a coffin.

WAGNER: Yes.

SMITH: The cross as a cross.

WAGNER: Yeah, but to give it to them independently, who cares? If you look at EP, so that's a sign, right? If you look at that awful, funky, terrible, saccharine organ cherub up there, by itself you'd throw it away. Anybody would throw that one away, wouldn't they? But when it's integrated into the whole, it works.

SMITH: At the same time, in the show there are three collages which come from the same period, and to me they seem to be playing with the same kind of ideas: to take scrap pieces of paper and put them together to form a poetic statement.

WAGNER: Those are very poetic, both of these.

SMITH: And then of course, your **Romantic Figure** is explicitly--

WAGNER: That's a little more literal, where these pieces are pure poetry. They're sign board, I mean, you know, from a billboard.

SMITH: Billboard. Where did you get-- You just--

WAGNER: Billboards. Out in the rain, when they peeled off in the wind and they ripped down. If you notice, that's a mirror image, right?

SMITH: Yes. On **Double S**?

WAGNER: Yeah. But one is brighter than the other. On the right it's red and black, but over there it's grey. But it's the same image, right? That's done by nature. That

has wet that paper and released the glue, then I could just fold it back like this. This had printed on the other side, so it transferred through the glue to give it a different tone on the right than on the left. But it's just a folded piece of billboard paper.

SMITH: In constructing those collages did you change the colors at all?

WAGNER: Nothing.

SMITH: Did you alter anything?

WAGNER: Pure, that's just the way I found it.

SMITH: You cut out the shapes, though, the way you--

WAGNER: No, not really. They were torn like that. I might have torn a piece off some place that was sticking out, rip it off. But no, that's the way it was. I don't like to alter anything.

SMITH: Well, in **Romantic Figure**, which is much more literal--

WAGNER: Well, that's a billboard too, the top part of the whole-- But then I ripped up a lot of rice paper, put glue in it and washed it over with ink. Then I streched it and put white glue on it and pulled it apart and stuck it there and hoped it would work. It's purely--

SMITH: And the horse?

WAGNER: The horse just happened to be something I found and I stuck it on there. There was no reason for it to

even be there, but I thought it was nice and ties it all together, you know.

SMITH: The image it creates, a kind of samurai kind of feeling.

WAGNER: It has that feeling, doesn't it? Like a samurai or some kind of an oriental figure.

SMITH: Was that already there in the scraps of paper and you--

WAGNER: No, that's all on the billboard.

SMITH: You just saw it suddenly and added on to it?

WAGNER: That's all.

SMITH: Your assemblages, like Sir **Deauville**, **HTG**, the **Railroad Man**, a lot of them for me create personalities. They seem to be portraits.

WAGNER: They become a personality. Like the **Railroad Man** certainly becomes a personality because that's exactly what he is, he's a railroad man. And he comes from another town. [interruption; tape recorder off]

SMITH: Okay, you were saying **Railroad Man**--

WAGNER: **Railroad Man** is a very, very beautiful concept of how I felt about a town with another dump almost as marvelous as Inn City, or Red Mountain, and that's Keeler. Keeler is about five miles east of Olancha, which is about ten miles north of Little Lake. Keeler is a delightful town of about two hundred houses, and ten people

live in the town, the postmaster and a few other characters. There's a railroad station in this town.

SMITH: Again, in the California desert? The Mojave Desert?

WAGNER: Yeah, it's on the potash lake; it's on the same shore bed as the American Potash & Chemical. It would be south of Lone Pine, if you were going to know the exact location, on the way to Panamint Junction and Darwin. Now, in this town it has a railroad station and it has a train, but it doesn't have any tracks. That's where I found the conductor's hat on the top, and the breakman's lanterns, and the railroad spikes, and the watch, and the number two, and the two gloves, old work gloves, one with two mules saying "Maude and Claude," and the other saying "Big Bud Warlong." The only thing that's not from Keeler in there is the train with the locomotive with two cars. That I found in Mexico. And the locomotive inside of the breakman's lantern is also from the Red Mountain Dump in Inn City. But it's a very, very important piece to me because it depicts almost a human being, like Sir Deauville.

SMITH: Almost, or even completely maybe. Do the personalities emerge as you put the pieces together, or are they concepts that are part of the initial concept as you start working that you're trying to liberate, like

Michelangelo liberating the figure from the piece of marble?

WAGNER: I know that if you have enough pieces and you find just one new piece there's a possibility that you have ten more to relate to it somewhere that make a whole. The excitement of the whole thing when you go to dumps in the desert, and strange places, you come back and you're still on that trip. You're still, well, I found this here, and you get thinking about that environment of where that came from, and it takes you through a whole association with the past, although you're working in the present. So the now and building something for the future, you kind of go through the past, present and future all at once. A nice transition takes place in there for you.

SMITH: What is the association of the past that you--

WAGNER: The nostalgia of the actual being there and the old civilization, the way it must have been and [how] the people were. You get to imagining these things while you're building, and you're feeling this piece. There's a feeling that I can never get from people, but I can get it from objects.

SMITH: Could you explain that a little bit more? You can never get that feeling of the past from people?

WAGNER: Only in dreams and old people, like old girlfriends and things like that, your first love, things

of that nature. And you miss people, you know, that you knew and you had fun with. You wonder where they've gone and what happened to them. But when you take objects like this, those objects all lived a full life, right? They were thrown out there as discards. Nobody wants them anymore. Dumped, and rained on, and rusted, and everything happens to them. Bent and twisted. Yet an assemblage artist comes along, he sees these things as actors, you know, and he brings them back, puts them back into play again, gives them a new life, a new way so they can be appreciated by people, and they're not just forgotten by laying out there forever to be weathered or buried. Once they're buried, the rust sets in so bad that dampness--they're finished. As long as they're up on the surface where they're dry, beautiful. So when they paved over the Red Mountain Dump, they were making a film about me called **Gordon Wagner Loves You.**

SMITH: Who was?

WAGNER: FilmFair. And I talked to them about how could they do such things as this? How could they take this beautiful dump and pave it over with a bulldozer, just cover it up for no reason, just to cover it up? It was the most disgusting act I've seen in years. So we had to drive all the way over to Inyokern and Ridgecrest, and on the way back up there we found another dump which was twice as big

as the Red Mountain Dump. It had stuff in it that had been there ever since the desert had been there. It was an incredible dump. It was at least two and a half miles long and a mile wide, down in a hole. And on the top it was filled, and the sides were filled; it was spewing all over the place. Gorgeous stuff there. I dug stuff out of there for years.

SMITH: So do you feel that in these pieces there's still some of the spiritual aura of the people who used to live--

WAGNER: You mean who leave them for me?

SMITH: Yeah, that leave them for you, that left them for you?

WAGNER: You mean I pick up on their energies?

SMITH: Yeah, do you feel that?

WAGNER: I have. On some pieces I feel that, yeah. I don't know if it was waiting for me, you know? I believe most of those things are waiting for you to come along and get it.

SMITH: Waiting for you personally?

WAGNER: Exactly.

SMITH: Not waiting for somebody, but for you, Gordon Wagner.

WAGNER: That's right. Because most people would just pass it by. They wouldn't have any more use for it than I would have for a Rolls-Royce car, you know?

SMITH: Now, **Two Loves** is another very poetic piece. How did that come to be? What is that--

WAGNER: That all started over my birthday in 1962, or '61, I forgot.

SMITH: 'Sixty-one is what's on the--

WAGNER: 'Sixty-one, yeah. That year in April it was built, in '61. Don Preston, who is a musician with the-- I hope I have the date right. Don Preston is a musician, he was with the Mothers of Invention for eight years with [Frank] Zappa. A great jazz pianist, one of the best. He came to my house one evening, on my birthday, and he brought a piece of birthday cake to me wrapped up in a jazz score called Persian. He had it all-- He'd just written that piece. He made another note I guess, but-- I unraveled it, and I loved the jazz score so much. I had these old-- I always collected broken piano mechanisms, all of the hammers. I never cared about the outside, but the mechanisms were interesting. I had all these broken piano parts, and I'd built a music machine about the same time out of gongs and bells and piano hammers.

SMITH: An instrument?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Or a piece of art.

WAGNER: You could play it. But a tree fell on that one, too, just completely totaled that one. So anyway, I'd

always loved jazz, from the time I can remember, from the forties when I was in Hermosa Beach, until-- And I always loved the classical also. So what happens with the two loves is that my love of the classical in the old violin case, and my love of jazz with the "Persian", the jazz score, and the piano parts and the piece of the pedal-- It's all related to music and my two loves, jazz and the classical. That's how it got its title.

SMITH: Another piece that's not in the show is the Night Clerk.

WAGNER: It's not in this show.

SMITH: No, it's not in this show, but you did that in Mexico, right?

WAGNER: Yeah. That piece was related to-- I found a typewriter, that's how it all started, and a door. And I decided-- I bought the typewriter for two pesos, which was sixteen cents in those days, and I found this owl on the skull, and put the big hands typing on the typewriter. And then I found the numbers for hotel rooms that went up one to nine, the levels, and a big S for Savoy, and a big Spanish doorknocker, and a Western Union telegram sign that was all cut in half, and a picture of the night clerk's girlfriend hanging on the one part and some coat hooks. The piece is a pretty big piece; it's seven feet high and three feet wide and a good piece. An old one but a good

one.

SMITH: There must be big differences between the assemblages that you did here in California and then those that you did in Mexico, if only because the junk that you would find is different.

WAGNER: Well, when I was in Mexico I was basically interested in making assemblages about the Day of the Dead, and death, and some religious shrines and things of that nature, and humor, and funkiness. Because to me, actually, Mexico is an assemblage. The whole country is like walking through a big assemblage. The funny things and the humor they have there, the taxicabs with the pushing on the brakes and the animals' heads light up in the back, and all of the-- It's really campy stuff, most of it, the dice-cube gearshifts, and skulls, and all of these things, and the hanging **cortinas** in the trucks, the diesel trucks, and the **cortinas** above the driver with the Virgin of Guadalupe up above him on the ceiling overlooking him to see that he doesn't get into any accidents, and all this symbology and object and assemblage. Mexico is an assemblage. When you use these elements that Mexico gives you in markets and junk places, naturally you're going to fall into that sort of energy, which to me was a confrontation with my fear of death and getting through it. So the Mexican pieces are definitely different from the American pieces because you

can't walk in a cemetery in America and find these kind of things.

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SMITH: You were saying you can't find these sorts of things--

WAGNER: No, because Mexican cemeteries, and New Mexican cemeteries, and the Arizona cemeteries are, so many of them, up on a hill with the wind blowing and the handmade monuments. Many of the monuments look like assemblages, the old weathered woods. They're so beautiful. Then the paper flowers all hanging in the wind. The goats eat all that up in a cemetery, you know, and chew all the flowers off of the graves. So everything is sort of askew. It's not like Forest Lawn, all ordered and not even a marker of where you're buried. You have to look for that with a number, I guess. So one time, I remember, speaking of that, a couple of us decided it would be very nice if Forest Lawn did have cemetery crosses and monuments. It was an early morning, I think in about 1960, that I took all my standing pieces to Forest Lawn and set them up on the lawns, and we took pictures of the whole thing in Forest Lawn with my assemblages to make it feel like it was a human place like you find in Mexico. That cross and-- The top of that piece is just out of a cemetery in Mexico. I didn't alter that at all, but the poor fellow's name in it hammered out of metal.

SMITH: But you didn't desecrate the grave to take that.

WAGNER: No, just thrown away. I mean, I've gone to the-- I've got some Russian cemetery pieces, but I didn't desecrate the grave. They were broken off and thrown away. I saw them and I was so happy to see these. They were shaped like a Russian-- I don't know. They have a certain point that comes down, and they round around, and they're brown and thick redwood. They ingrave the letters and stamp them in the wood. Says, "Here lies the body of Timofey Zekun waiting for the call of the Archangel Gabriel. Born such-and-such a date and died one year later."

SMITH: Where did you get those?

WAGNER: I got that out of the Russian cemetery, next to the Serbian cemetery, in East L.A., where the Long Beach Freeway goes alongside the Chinese cemetery. Next to that there's a Russian church, and in there it was a whole graveyard of Russian monuments and they're all handmade wood.

SMITH: That had been thrown out?

WAGNER: Yeah. They were in a pile to be burned up. I saw them one afternoon so I arranged with a friend of mine-- matter of fact, the lady who owns this painting right here--to go there at night.

SMITH: Now, who's that?

WAGNER: Her name is Kay [Katherine] Boggs. To go there at night, but she chickened out. I was going to wait until the full of the moon when nobody would be around, and it would be dark, you know, but we could still see all right. So I got two more friends of mine, a painter named Bob Fremont and his wife Henriette. At that time I was living with Hedy Mergenthaler, my Swiss mistress. So we all took off in our old car to get these pieces, about six of them. We got over there and thought it wouldn't be used, but the place was lighted up like a nighttime freeway, you know, just daylight all over the place. You could see right through the trees, it was so bright. It looked like a fairground. So we pulled up alongside. I said, "Okay, I'll keep an eye. You're the thin one, Henriette, you can get through that fence"--about that much--"and you throw them over to us. We'll stick them in the backseat, and if anybody questions us, we're musicians and these are our instrument cases." So we had all this stacked up on the backseat. Oh no! A policeman showed up. And he says, "Can I help you? Do you have a problem?"

And I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I'm trying to find out how they can possibly run the Long Beach Freeway through the consecrated land of the Chinese cemetery."

"They can't do that."

I said, "It certainly looks like they're going to take off the whole corner of the cemetery."

"I'll go down to the office and check it out; I'll be right back."

By that time, we had everything loaded in. He came back. We waited for him. He came back, he says, "No, it's going to miss it by about fifty yards."

"Boy," I said, "that's a close one."

"Yeah," he said, "I can see what you'd be worried about."

I said, "We just came over to check this out. Thank you very much." And we drove away sitting on these grave markers. [laughter] I still have them. I have one out in the garage; it's a beautiful one.

SMITH: Now, the Forest Lawn caper, that was-- You and who else was involved in that?

WAGNER: What?

SMITH: Were you the only artist? It was just your work that you brought out? Or who else was involved with that? Forest Lawn. You were telling me about--

WAGNER: Oh, just me. And a friend. We just did it for kicks. I never got the photographs of it either, but I wanted to.

SMITH: Was there any publicity?

WAGNER: No, no, no. We just wanted to see what it would

look like. We were going to mail them some photographs. I think he did. I can't remember who it was that was with me.

SMITH: You mentioned several times that this period was a period when you were concerned about death. And of course, most of these pieces were done shortly after your first wife [Patricia Elliot Wagner] died. That must have been-- And then you went through a major--it seems like a major-- turnaround in your life, or crisis in your life.

WAGNER: Yeah. These pieces were done in the sixties, the paintings. Well, plus the fact that I took off for Mexico, you see, at that time, right after my first wife died.

SMITH: She died very young?

WAGNER: I could really immerse myself in it, you see?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Then get into my own fear, and probably a-- Well, I couldn't face dying or death, you know, I was afraid of it. I didn't want to hear about it in America because it seems so cold and commercialized, you know. So I couldn't face it. So when I got to Mexico, I decided, "Well, let's laugh about it and enjoy it. Death is where you begin." I got that out. It's the beginning of life, not the end.

SMITH: After your first wife died, you stopped and dropped out of engineering completely, right?

WAGNER: Yeah, right.

SMITH: You were working at Rocketdyne?

WAGNER: Yes.

SMITH: Was there a connection between your wife's death and your deciding that you could no longer be an engineer?

SMITH: Well, yeah. Actually, I didn't want to stay at Rocketdyne anyway. I only went there with the idea of getting enough money to go to Mexico. I was only going to stay for a year, but then by the time they appointed me to supervisor of the design group, they wouldn't let me go. Then it kept dragging on. I think I was there for about two years, two or three, something like that. The only reason I really left was because I wanted to go back to Mexico, and I wanted to paint. I lived up in Topanga Canyon, and I wasn't too interested in the corporate structure and the boring bourgeois at that time. I was into a different kind of society in Topanga Canyon, where I belonged. We always said, "Keep them out if they don't live here, and don't let them out if they do." That was kind of a rule we had in Topanga. I fit more into that environment. Going to Rocketdyne was such a bore; although the work was interesting, the surroundings and what I had to go through-- The thing that really triggered me is when they told me that I would have to actually keep track of my men when they came back from lunch. If they were three minutes late I was supposed to talk to them. I went up on

a mountain in Topanga for lunch-- They told me that one morning, and I went up on the mountain, to Saddle Peak, way up high. I got out my I Ching and tossed the coin, and it said, "Don't worry about the lightning and the thunder. The storm will be passing and you won't have to hear it anymore or think about it, and everything will be calm and beautiful after the storm. Don't fear anything, just let it be, what's going to happen. Look for a positive life and a good way." So I went back and walked in at the end of my lunch hour and gave them twenty-seven minutes' notice. I walked out of the place and that was it. I never came back.

SMITH: Now, was this after your first wife died? Did this happen after she died?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, about maybe a year, six months.

SMITH: And then you've never worked--

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: --since then. How were you supporting yourself after that?

WAGNER: Well, I wasn't really supporting myself too well. It doesn't cost much to live in Mexico. I could manage it for about five hundred dollars a year with a big house and a servant and everything.

SMITH: Were your daughters [Sandy Wagner Hinze and Tima Wagner Duffield] with you at that time?

WAGNER: Oh, yeah. Well, one of them was married and living back East, just married somebody that was going to become a submarine captain. He's now retired.

SMITH: Your eldest daughter?

WAGNER: Yes.

SMITH: She must have been very young when she got married, then.

WAGNER: She was nineteen. Like my wife was nineteen when she married me. All I know is that I was selling a lot of art, much more than I am now because the art movement was on. I couldn't lose. I was winning awards in museums, and everything was like [James] Strombotny says, "I had it made". The "syndicate" had not really gotten going, you know. It hadn't moved into that point yet; they were still in the birth.

SMITH: Let's move back a couple of points before I forget it. Would you define what you mean by the "syndicate"?

WAGNER: No, I won't. Because I don't want to damage myself or them. I'd rather keep that-- I'll tell you, but I won't tell you on this thing.

SMITH: Well, Okay. We'll get back to what the "syndicate" is in a little bit.

You were mentioning that at the time you were in Mexico you were selling well in general, and you were living very comfortably then. You had a big house and a

servant. Was your younger daughter living with you at the time?

WAGNER: Rented, yes. I rented that house.

SMITH: Where was this? In Oaxaca or--

WAGNER: Yeah. Eight dollars and thirty-four cents a month.

SMITH: Was this the house on the town square?

WAGNER: Yeah. Across from the post office in Oaxaca, right off the square.

SMITH: So one sale could go a long way for--

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, of course. That's why. So I took my funds and I went for a while. I came back to Topanga again, and I was really happy in Topanga. That was my-- I still miss Topanga a lot. Of course, it's changed so much now; it's not the same Topanga.

SMITH: Where were you--

WAGNER: Forty-five dollars a month rent; I had a wonderful studio in Topanga.

SMITH: Where was your work being shown at this time, in the fifties, '55 to '60? Where was your work being shown?

WAGNER: Oh, in the fifties?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Well, I was represented in all the major museums.

SMITH: Such as?

WAGNER: In the Whitney [Museum of American Art], in the

Corcoran [Gallery Biennial]; all of them across the country. I mean, huge amounts in museums in the Middle West, like [Art Institute of] Chicago and Toledo Museum [of Art] and Texas and Kansas City [Nelson Art Gallery]. I was winning a lot of awards and making money. It was very good.

SMITH: Now, when you won an award, how much money would you make? These are museum awards?

WAGNER: Yeah, well, cash awards, a lot of cash awards, and a few purchase awards from the Denver [Art] Museum.

SMITH: And how much money are we talking about, a thousand dollars, ten thousand? What are we--

WAGNER: No, in those days maybe a thousand to five thousand, you know? But it was enough. It went a lot farther at that time than it does now. And galleries, I had shows in different galleries. In the fifties I had my first exhibition in Los Angeles in the Now Gallery, which was Ed [Edward] Kienholz's gallery in the old Turnabout Theatre building. He had a wonderful gallery there. That was before he became incorporated with Walter Hopps and the Ferus Gallery. So people were coming to my studio all the time. I was getting lots from articles about winning an award here; they'd read the paper and they'd come. I was selling paintings out of my studio.

SMITH: To whom? What kind of people?

WAGNER: Just to anybody that would come. It was a different kind of world then. People bought art.

SMITH: How much would one of your paintings sell for?

WAGNER: Well, I'd do a real good deal if I sold one for $500, $750, in those days.

SMITH: I assume that we're talking about your paintings that were selling. Your assemblages--

WAGNER: Assemblages weren't selling yet. No. [laughter] I had all these paintings. A lot of them were Navaho paintings. I painted 250 of those, with two left. They're in this exhibition. I did pretty well from that, just selling those paintings. So that's how I made a living.

SMITH: Silvan Simone was your regular-- Was he your agent? Was he your exclusive gallery?

WAGNER: Yeah, he sold a lot of art for me. He must have sold three or four hundred pieces for me over a period of those years.

SMITH: Did you have an arrangement with him? Was he buying a certain percentage of your work?

WAGNER: No, he didn't buy anything, it was all on commission. But he was a salesman who could sell art. If somebody expressed even as much as a little interest he'd go on for an hour about the life of the artist and, [imitating Simone] "Oh, it's a beautiful painting." He was

a real showman. He could do it. He knew his business, and he knew how to handle people. I liked Silvan. He was a real person, he wasn't-- He was anti "syndicate" art. He was a real rebel against the whole system, you know. A man came in one day, he wanted to buy a painting from me. He's going on, he's telling this man all about this painting. The man stands there and looks at it for a while, wonders about it. Simone never even asked his name, you know, never bothered to bother, anything about him. And I said, "Do you know who this man is?"

And he says, "No."

I said, "That's Nelson Eddy." [laughter] He didn't know anything about Nelson Eddy. He knew none of the celebrities that came into his gallery at all, like Audrey Hepburn and people like that, and Natalie Wood, who were big customers. He never even knew what they did. He was totally a man of pasta, fishing, hunting, and selling art.

SMITH: Did you ever exhibit in Vincent Price and George McReady's gallery?

WAGNER: Vincent Price?

SMITH: And George McReady had a gallery in Beverly Hills.

WAGNER: Vincent Price?

SMITH: Price, yeah.

WAGNER: Well, I met Vincent Price, that's all.

SMITH: You never showed in his gallery?

WAGNER: No. I showed once in a gallery that was up on Wilshire next to-- I can't even remember the name of the gallery anymore. I just remember it was next to--what's that fancy restaurant called? It's near Western [Avenue].

SMITH: Oh, Perino's?

WAGNER: Perino's. It was next door to Perino's. They sold three or four paintings. They sold one to Hal Roach, I remember.

SMITH: What kind of paintings were these at this time? These are the Navaho paintings largely that you're talking about?

WAGNER: They were--

SMITH: Are they like your Nebraska Speedway paintings?

WAGNER: No, this is way before. This is back in the forties. These paintings were related to amusement parks, mostly.

SMITH: Did you have a gallery in San Francisco?

WAGNER: No. Not at that time.

SMITH: In the fifties? No?

WAGNER: No. When was it? I'd shown in San Francisco at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, but I didn't have any gallery there.

SMITH: What about in New York? Did you have a New York representative? Did you try to get one?

WAGNER: No.

SMITH: Why not?

WAGNER: I don't know. I was too busy with Mexico and the beach and California. Everybody said I should go to New York, and I said, "What for?" Because I hadn't been to New York since I was eighteen years old. I drove across the United States in my old Model A Ford from L.A. to New York state to visit my relatives, who all lived in upstate New York. One of them decided that she was-- One of my aunts decided that we were going to go to New York on the Hudson River night line from Albany. We were going to stay with another aunt of mine that lived in a fancy hotel there. I don't remember the name of it. I can't remember the name of that hotel, but it's one of the most important hotels in New York. She took me around. All I saw of New York was a lot of people all dressed up in black suits and white shirts and black ties looking very depressed in Manhattan. Here I was, right from the beach, I wanted to go bodysurfing and go home. I'd had enough of that place. [laughter] I loved upstate New York, but that city gave me no energy whatsoever at that time. She took me dinner dancing, and all of these sort of things, and that was the last thing I was interested in doing. And Greenwich Village, she said, "Well, we won't go down there, a lot of strange people live down there." If she'd have shown me the Village, I might have been happy. But she took me to

the Stork Club and a few places like this, Forty-second Street.

When I finally did go to New York to visit one time--that was in the sixties, I guess--after I married Virginia [Copeland Wagner], she was from New York, and I was staying with a friend of hers, we stayed at Seventy-second [Street] and Central Park West, right near the Dakota, you know? And I said, "Oh, this is quite a city." And then I got into New York and a gallery in New York bought some of my work, the Lee Nordness Gallery.

SMITH: This is in the sixties, though.

WAGNER: Yeah, in the sixties. Out of the Long Beach Museum [of Art]. He bought some assemblages. And that's when I-- So I went to see him. He was on Ninety-second [Street] and Third Avenue. And I got more into New York, and then I fell in love with New York, and now I think that New York is one of the greatest cities ever. But to live there, for me it would be an impossibility because it's just too expensive at the moment.

SMITH: Getting back to the fifties. Let's take your best year: How many paintings would you have sold and how much money would you have made from that?

WAGNER: I have no idea.

SMITH: No idea?

WAGNER: No. I used to sell roughly about three paintings

a week. That was in the late fifties and the early sixties.

SMITH: You were selling them for $500 each painting?

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, sometimes $750, sometimes $350, you know.

SMITH: So you were making fifty thousand dollars a year from your painting? Which at that time was--

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: --a lot of money.

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, I had a wonderful life. Things were-- All artists were selling art. You know in those days there was action, the galleries on La Cienega [Boulevard] and the-- Everybody went out every Monday night to look at the exhibitions on the street, the new shows, see what was going on. The galleries, the museums were booming, and the programs on TV were good, and the interviews. They had open annuals for the artists, you know, in the museum. Everybody was active. Most of these artists who had participated in those days are dead. I don't mean physically dead, I mean nobody hears from them anymore. Some really fantastic artists, but they can't get exhibitions, nobody wants them. They are bitter, disappointed, because they've been overlooked and just written off. Fortunately, being an assemblage artist, I went beyond the painting so I'm still popular today.

Because assemblage is just finding its own now. I can't remember in the last ten years when I haven't been in an exhibition someplace. Maybe the last twenty years. Let's see, this is '86; '76, yeah. I've always been in invitation, always invited to some exhibition. It never stops for me. But I feel sorry for these painters that are-- Painting isn't what they want anymore. The painters have been wiped out through the commercialism of painting. And the collectors, they're not interested in painters, the old painter. In the old days everybody was guilty, they had to have art. They had to have a painting over their television set or over their couch to make them look like they were culturally aware. Nowadays, they're not told that anymore; they're not told anything; they're far removed. And the younger generation, I don't think they're interested in abstract expressionism. They want space and science and that kind of fantasy art. So it's real difficult for just an artist.

SMITH: Well, you've mentioned the "syndicate" as being a cause of what happened, a "decline" of California art. Though I think if you read the art history, what's written about art, it's the period of the sixties that's viewed as the boom, and the period of the forties and fifties as a kind of mishmash of too many different things and not very much quality. So your opinion is not shared by a lot of

the critics, I guess. But let's go-- Were you involved with the Ferus Gallery when it-- I mean, you were involved with Kienholz when it was the Now Gallery.

WAGNER: Yeah, I was there a very short time with Ed. What really happened is that the West Coast artists were doing just fine until the new museum came along with Tuchman, right, Maurice Tuchman. He decided who was going to be an artist and who wasn't going to be. As Arnold Schiffrin told me one time, "Well, we'll cut the whole thing off with Gordon Wagner." Arnold told me. I don't know if it's true or not, but that's what-- Tuchman told the whole system. Well, there was John Coplans, and there was Walter [Hopps], and there was--what was his name?--John, from the Dwan Gallery in Westwood, who was a-- They just opened up to lose money. Ed Kienholz was getting paid two hundred dollars a month to be a janitor in the place. But they were giving him all of the possible publicity in every magazine, back pages, front, to spend money, to lose it, because they were the richest stockbrokers in New York and their gallery was a tax write-off. So they didn't want artists sold, but they wanted to give them lots of publicity, like [Claes] Oldenburg and like Andy Warhol.

SMITH: They sell, and they sell for quite--

WAGNER: Every single one of them. They pushed up. Not to give them money, just fame.

SMITH: Yeah, but their pieces sell for thousands and thousands of dollars, right?

WAGNER: But Dwan didn't get that.

SMITH: Oh.

WAGNER: They got hooked in with [Leo] Castelli [Gallery] and Corcoran [Gallery] and-- What's the other one? Oh, there's about three major ones.

SMITH: Are you thinking of [Felix] Landau [Gallery]?

WAGNER: Well, New York.

SMITH: Oh, the New York--

WAGNER: Castelli, and then there's the Corcoran, and there's the Feigen-Palmer [Gallery]. A few of the snob galleries appointed people in the museum for the arts councils to see that the museum got to the right people to give them the money and get the right collectors to come to their gallery and educate them to buy only their art. Well, Walter was a great manipulator at this. He even taught people like Betty Asher and Fred Grunwald and Betty Freeman, all the big collectors, what to buy. He had a class called "Looking at Modern Art." And every week he'd say, "Well, I'd like you to get some Ad Reinhardts this week." So they'd go out and buy Ad Reinhardts. Then he would criticize each painting for them, and they'd take it home for their collection. And the next week it would be Oldenburg, and the next week it would be Jim Dine or

somebody else, or Craig Kauffman, or Billy Al Bengston, or [Edward] Ruscha, right? And Arthur Secunda, he was asked by Walter, he said, "I've had a nervous breakdown, Arthur, and I want you to take over my class at UCLA." And he walked in and said, "What's this, 'Be Kind to Ad Reinhardt Night'?" "Oh, yes, Mr. Hopps tells us to buy a different piece each week for our collection."

While Walter was the director of the Pasadena [Art] Museum, he was spending more time in New York with Castelli than he was in the Pasadena museum. So they fired him. In the interim, John Coplans took over Walter's job. He was the most obnoxious man that ever walked the face of the earth. No man can be a reviewer to an exhibition and say, "Well, this is a great show we have here in the San Francisco museum, and aren't we lucky that we don't have Rico Lebrun in it," and things like that. So John Coplans finally got his end cut off when-- June Wayne gave him a set of prints from the Tamarind [Lithography] Workshop to show in the Pasadena Museum. June Wayne got a call about three weeks later from some man who said, "What does this mark mean on the bottom of these prints?" And she said, "I don't understand what you're talking about. What prints?" He says, "Well, I bought all these prints and I don't know what the mark means." She went out there and said, "Well, those are Tamarind, our

trademark stamp, just a little stamp. Where did you get these?" "Oh, John Coplans sold them to us." So that's when June Wayne hit the fan and went to bat against John, had him fired. The thing that really got him fired even farther was some little old lady in Pasadena who was so mad at John Coplans because he wouldn't show her china [laughter] in the collection when she'd put all this money into the museum.

So John and Walter and the Castellis and the Feigen-Palmers and the Corcorans and Tuchman and a lot of other ones set this whole thing up to present just a few artists in America as the greats. They'd been built up all this time through all this PR until they actually believed the publicity themselves. So they're the ones you always find on the top of the pile. You look in the new museum [Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)] down there, it's either New York or those guys, right?

SMITH: Now, Irving Blum in his interview--in his oral history interview--says that when he came into Ferus, the problem was that it represented too many people, so he cut it down to twelve, which were the people that he thought he could represent the best.

WAGNER: Walter?

SMITH: No, Irving Blum.

WAGNER: Irving Blum. Well, that was much later. Irving

Blum came along miles later.

SMITH: No, this was '58.

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, Ferus started in about '54 I think, '53. But I remember most of them, Artie Richer, and John Reed, and Dane Dixon, and Harry Cohen, and Sonia Gechtoff, and Wally [Wallace] Berman, Ed Kienholz, Peter Voulkos, Billy Al Bengston, Hassel Smith and-- What's the other one? Well, I'd say about half of them are dead now. Oh, Gil Henderson. Go talk to him sometime, the most bitter man in the United States.

SMITH: Did you ever try to interest Blum in your work? Did you have any business--

WAGNER: With Blum?

SMITH: Irving Blum.

WAGNER: No. Nodded at him, nicely. Nothing to do with him.

SMITH: But you knew Hopps fairly well, right?

WAGNER: Yeah. But I never-- Hopps was a-- I liked Hopps. He was a nice guy. I still like him. I think he's funny. He's clever. He's got a lot of sophistication and a cosmopolitan attitude. The last time I saw Walter was in George Herms's house in Topanga Canyon. He and [Henry] Geldzahler are about the same type of guys. Immediately every guy in the place all said the same thing, "Bolt things down, here comes Walter." Because he had a habit of

stealing art from artists, you know. Sticking it under his coat, assemblages and objects. Like Geldzahler was going to walk out of a gallery in Taos with one of my pieces, and Tally Richards said, "Where are you going with that, Henry?" "Oh, I'm sorry," and he put it back. He was going to steal it. They take advantage of artists, and they manipulate them like they were some kind of race horses, you see? They've made thoroughbreds out of this one group that they've built up. They've got a lot of money built up in these people, like they've got money built up with [Jackson] Pollock and [Willem] de Kooning, and they're not about to let other people come in, just anybody, you see. They've been building them for years, see? It takes money to build up an artist and it all started, basically, with Walter. Walter's not a poor man. I think he comes from a very rich family, you know. And as far as the Dwan Gallery, they opened their gallery for exactly-- What is it, five years that you can write it off? And then they closed it in Westwood. Then they moved to New York, and they opened it for five years there. And then they moved to Chicago, and they opened it for five years in a different town. Just for the tax write-off. Because an art gallery, the way they were spending money, they can lose millions of dollars with all of this wonderful publicity. Every artist was back page and color, front

page, inside. On every one of their artists, you know.

SMITH: Well, what about Silvan Simone, what kind of publicity would he do for you?

WAGNER: He hated them all. He was anti-"syndicate"; he wouldn't even let them in the door. He wouldn't even let a-- I remember one time, it was a Sunday morning and I had just stopped by there to drop something off, and he said, "You know who was here this morning to look at your show?"

And I said, "Who?"

"Bill [William] Seitz, and Walter Hopps, and--" The guy who's in New York. Oh, what's his name? A critic and writer. Anyway, three of them. "I wouldn't let them in. I told them to come back some other day." [laughter] He wouldn't even let them in the door to see my-- He said, "If they want to come back, they can come at the right hours." That's the way he was. He hated [Henry] Seldis with a passion. I remember one time Seldis wanted [José Luis] Cuevas to go on a trip with him to Santa Barbara. So Silvan arranges for it. Henry picks him up, and they went up to Santa Barbara for the day. Cuevas was always mimicking Seldis. He'd say, "Oh, we're going to go in this gallery and nobody's going to like me in here; they don't like me up here." This is the way Cuevas would talk. "So all day I'm with this guy Seldis, and coming back home he tells me what he wants: He wants to write the introduction

for my suite called Charenton. And I said, 'Is that going to cost me money?'

"He says, 'Yeah. It will cost you money.'"

"'Well, I don't have any money.'"

"'Well,'" he says, "'Silvan will take care of it. There's a reason I want to write it, because it's such a beautiful suite.'"

When Silvan heard about all this he really hit the fan. He called Henry up, he said, "Don't you ever come back into my gallery again as long as you live. It isn't that you cannot write the introduction, it is the fact that you're writing an introduction on something you've never seen, and I call that hypocrisy."

WAGNER: Well, after he said he was going to have him thrown out in the street in the middle of Olympic Boulevard, he went to the [Los Angeles] Times, and he went to the Chandlers and told them what had happened. He got up a petition of about thirty-five galleries on La Cienega [Boulevard] against [Henry] Seldis because Seldis was not writing reviews to some of the galleries, and the ones he was writing to, he was being paid lots of money to write reviews for. So the whole thing hit the fan. Everybody was with [Silvan] Simone, most of the galleries. Except the top galleries, the "syndicate" galleries, were quiet. They wouldn't sign anything.

SMITH: Do you remember--

WAGNER: Because they knew better.

SMITH: Do you remember, are we talking 1960, '65? Or in the fifties?

WAGNER: When this happened?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: This happened probably '65, '67, around in there.

SMITH: So you were saying the top galleries knew better.

WAGNER: They wouldn't have anything to do with it. They were scared that something might happen to them. But no, people like Ankrum [Gallery], and all those people, and

[Esther] Robles and [Felix] Landau, they all went along with it. But there were quite a few that were out of it because they were paying big money to Seldis. They stayed out of it. Like the "syndicate." Silvan was a fighter, so from that day on, Seldis never came to Silvan's gallery. He always sent either Bill [William] Wilson or somebody else; usually Bill Wilson. What year was it that I had my exhibition where he called me the "Spanish mystic"?

SMITH: Bill Wilson or Seldis?

WAGNER: Wilson.

SMITH: I'm not sure, but I think that was the early seventies. But I'm not positive on that.

WAGNER: That's when Bill Wilson took over. You see, before that there was Arthur Millier, and he died. Then they had Constance Perkins for a long time. She was good. Connie Perkins, she was a good-- She was on the **Times**.

SMITH: Now, what do you mean when-- What are your criteria for evaluating a critic? Aside from what they say about your own work.

WAGNER: To give people a knowledge of what's going on, of what's going on, expressing it from the point of [view of] the viewer without being deliberately destructive and throwing their own ego into the article and being a smart, wise-cracking type of person. Like there are so many

critics today that are not interested in-- They don't have a right to be critics. They can destroy an artist just by what they write. The written word is a very strong form of expression, and they are very, very hard on a lot of people. Destructive wit is the worst kind.

SMITH: Were the critics at the **Times** sympathetic to funk art? to assemblage?

WAGNER: Some.

SMITH: Such as? Were there people that you could talk to about it?

WAGNER: You mean critics?

SMITH: Critics, yes.

WAGNER: Yeah, well, I think that Wilson was sympathetic to assemblage. And I think [Alfred] Frankenstein was certainly--in San Francisco--was certainly sympathetic to it. And what's his name? Back East. Is it Hess? Thomas B. Hess, certainly him; he was a lover of it. And Bill [William] Seitz. I don't know about John Canaday and people like that. They kind of thought it was still dada, you know?

SMITH: You are sometimes associated with the funk movement. Do you identify yourself with that, the funk movement?

WAGNER: Yeah, I would. I've made quite a few funky pieces in my life.

SMITH: Well, what's funk art? Define funk art.

WAGNER: Basically, funk art usually has a theme in mind and the relation of things or the juxtaposition that makes it almost surreal. It's not poetic; just funky. It can be very ugly and be so funky and dirty and full of cobwebs and-- Or it can be very slick and polished, almost kitsch.

SMITH: Which pieces in this show are funk art?

WAGNER: The funkiest piece I have in this exhibition is that piece.

SMITH: **Between Heaven and Hell?**

WAGNER: Yes. That's pretty funky.

SMITH: I guess many people would consider **Sir Deauville**--

WAGNER: No, this is funky too. This can be funky.

SMITH: That assemblage-- The kind of assemblage you do is--

WAGNER: Yeah, kind of dirty. The ones around the corner, they're not very funky. There's still some kind of order there, a cleanliness to them.

SMITH: Talking about, you know, assemblage art again and that, how would-- The other artists that were doing assemblage were [Edward] Kienholz and [Wallace] Berman and [George] Herms. Who else was doing work that you considered to be important assemblage?

WAGNER: Well, as I said, I liked Ben Talbert. He was a very good man. And I liked Tony Berlant's work. He used

to hammer out-- He'd take like a metal globe earth, you know, toy globes made of metal with a map, you know, like a world ball. He'd flatten it all out, and then he'd overlay it on things and nail it all down with little nails. The whole thing would be flattened and cut around. He used it as sort of overlay on boxes and constructions and things. And he'd put funny things inside of houses. He liked to build houses and buildings with things, maybe a finger or nose, sticking up through it. I liked Tony Berlant's work. Of course, a master of a lot of this was [Joseph] Cornell, wasn't he?

SMITH: Right, but he's not-- But he's a very different kind of artist. He's neither assemblage nor--

WAGNER: Still objects.

SMITH: Objects, but--

WAGNER: He's still an assemblage artist.

SMITH: Okay, right, he is assemblage, but of a very different nature.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: He's not in the California scene, either.

WAGNER: New York.

SMITH: New York. And barely in the scene there. I want to get into Cornell, but not right now.

WAGNER: But there's so many different--

SMITH: Because assemblage and funk art was something that

was very particular to California in the fifties and sixties.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Something that-- It was done other places, but it really became something very much typical of the California-- Many California artists were interested.

WAGNER: Yeah, a lot of funk art was done in ceramics, too, remember. Like many good pieces were very real; it's the way they were related to each other that made them unreal. But Emeryville was going full blast in the--

SMITH: The Emeryville Flats, right.

WAGNER: Mud flats. As a matter of fact, it's still going at full blast, because they just had the Inter-Dada Festival there last year. It was called the Midnight Scream, and it was in the mud flats.

SMITH: So you take somebody, Kienholz, who's done--whose assemblages are very, very well known. How would you compare-- What's the difference between your work and his work from your point of view? I'm not talking in terms of quality, but just in terms of what your perspectives are, what you were exploring.

WAGNER: Well, I don't see any relationship between our work at all. No relation whatsoever. Ed has always been a man of tableaux; of protest; of shock, either in psych wards or in Barney's Beanery; of violence; of beds and

bedpans and whorehouses; and of the erotic; and very shock-- For the shock value, you know. I don't think I ever really was that much interested in doing anything for the shock value. It was always more humorous or poetic in its connotation, not shock. I wasn't rebelling against-- Ed loves hunting and fishing and all the outdoors things, and he's a-- I've known him ever since he came down here from Oregon. I remember the first time I ever met him.

SMITH: When was that?

WAGNER: In 1953, I think, in Topanga Canyon. He came to visit me with another friend of mine named Arnold Wagman, who-- He said, "You've got to meet this guy." (Arnold's from New York.) "You've got to meet this guy. I've got a friend I think you ought to meet."

I said, "Yeah? Where does he live?"

"He doesn't live. He lives in a house without a roof. He puts these big canvases on the floor, and he has a party and spills wine all over them and stuffs cigarettes on them and does all these kind of things. But no roof, so it rains and the whole thing gets wet."

So one day I meet this guy; it's Ed Kienholz. And we took a liking to each other immediately. "You've got to come down and see my show that I'm going to have," he tells me.

So I said, "Fine. I'd like to see what you're

doing." It was at Von's Café Galleria [Coffeehouse] in Laurel Canyon. It was right there in the little square. He's got an espresso bar, old Von. Von was a man who liked artists. Ed had his show there, his first show. He had pieces about, oh, five by five feet, wood, plywood, just smeared all over with paint in every direction. Then a two-by-four and maybe another block of wood nailed onto that, and that was all painted and smeared and dripping. He had about eight of those in reds and browns and greens. He used a lot of house paint; just threw it on there, dripped it, built up. Sometimes there was half varnish and half enamel, and it would explode and bubble and give eruptions like volcanoes. He used all kinds of-- some kind of real sick red paint like-- I don't know where he got it from. Like a dye. Probably was a dye. That would be on it. Real messy work. But there was something interesting about them, and I liked them.

SMITH: Shocking or graphic?

WAGNER: To Von he said, "This guy's going to have the next show with you, you know that?" That's what he told Von. And he said, "Oh, that would be fine." So I followed Ed with the next exhibition, and then Keith Finch after me, and then Hans Burkhardt and a few people like that. Von was nice to all of us. So that's how I first met Ed. He was always wonderful. His wife's name was Mary. Mary was

great. I loved Mary. She was always walking around looking for junk with him. They were always out in the trash barrels and the streets. He'd trade anything. If he had something-- If he had a piece, I'll trade you for a typewriter. I'll trade you for a lawnmower, a drill press, a motorcycle or-- He'd trade anything. Incredible guy.

SMITH: What about the-- How would you--

WAGNER: I just want to say one more thing.

SMITH: Sure, go ahead.

WAGNER: When he first started assemblage, he wasn't doing any protest. He was doing just wood.

SMITH: Graphic--

WAGNER: Just blocks of wood in two-dimensional wall reliefs. He even continued doing that even more when he went with the Ferus [Gallery]. He was still doing it; making woods together and painting them white and black. That went on even when he was with the Syndell [Studios] gallery, which was Walter [Hopps]'s gallery in Brentwood on Gorham Avenue. He was doing them there. And it wasn't-- And then I lost track of him for a while. He had a huge show where he did all kinds of clocks, and boxes, and machines, and people and things. That show was at the Dwan Gallery. He was doing something kind of clean and nice. And then he had the show in the Ferus with **The Madam, Hopps Hopps Hopps**, and **The Meat Market**, and a few other pieces.

Barney's [Beanery] was very late. He was also in tune with--

I saw him with Niki de Saint-Phalle when she had her shooting gallery painting. She used to take things like chairs, and dishes, and plates, and furniture legs, and dolls' heads and arms and nail them on a piece about the size of this wall with spray bombs and cans of enamel and all these things. Then she'd get back and take her shotgun and she'd break that can, and all that paint would run down all over the furniture and over the whole thing. She'd go around, she'd shoot these things until the whole painting was moving with color over the objects and through them. I saw her one time, she was shooting at raw eggs and one of them popped back and hit her right in the mouth. [laughter]

I don't know if you ever knew Michael Murphy. He's a filmmaker in Malibu on--what's it called?--some road that goes back in there from the beach. Mike Murphy. A good filmmaker. It was up at his place that she did all this. I remember Ed coming, bringing in a load of junk in his car. His truck was was an old '37, I think, and all it said on the door was "Ed Kienholz, Expert." [laughter]

SMITH: Have you kept in touch with him over the years?

WAGNER: No, I haven't seen him for a long time. He lives up in Idaho. He lived in Germany; lived there eight years,

in Kassel. Paid by the German government to live there and work there. Then he comes back to Hope, Idaho, which he calls "New Hope." I see his second or third wife, I don't know, Lynn, from time to time. Now he has Nancy Reddin, Chief [Tom] Reddin's daughter, of the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department].

SMITH: How would you define the differences between your work and Wally Berman's work?

WAGNER: Wally Berman?

SMITH: Yeah. Particularly in terms of assemblage.

WAGNER: How would I relate him to me or to Kienholz?

SMITH: No, to you.

WAGNER: Oh, nothing to do with me.

SMITH: Yeah, but you're both involved in funk art, you're both involved in assemblage.

WAGNER: Yeah, but nothing to do with--

SMITH: So what are the distinctions between your concerns and his concerns?

WAGNER: Wallace Berman was always basically a very religious man. He was into the Cabala, and most everything he does is Cabalistic. All of his Hebrew writing and characters, whether they're on rocks and boxes or if they're in tableaux, they're always related to the Cabala. And his motto, as I remember-- I remember when his show was closed down in the Ferus Gallery. He had a big

cross in the gallery with a picture of he and Shirley in bed and a sign that read, "Art is Love is God." That was his motto. He had a power, Wallace Berman had a power that never, never-- He never tried to have anything happen. He never asked for anything. He just lived by the way he was. He had all these miracles, always, you know, that were going on. He was probably one of the best recognized artists, like [Marcel] Duchamp: Never did anything, but he's, well, he's the second best artist in the world, Duchamp, right? Picasso and Duchamp. They both went one way and the other. So Wally was like a Duchamp type, quiet and to himself; lived in the hills. A true bohemian. But very, very serious about his-- It was either that or he was putting on a big front, because everybody loved Wally. He had a lot of light within him that came forth. He gave out that energy.

SMITH: There's nothing in common except you're also a religious artist-- In this period you're exploring non-Christian types of religious symbology?

WAGNER: Well, now, you can't say that exactly, because how about the "Love" of George Herms? Who's in between? George Herms was influenced deeply by Wally; he was like-- They were just inseparable. But George Herms never did anything that had to do with the Cabala. He did something with love and the poetic and the objects. That's what I

call poetic assemblage: George Herms.

SMITH: Right. Well, what about you and George Herms? How would you define the distinctions between your approach to assemblage and his approach?

WAGNER: Well, actually, George Herms never collects objects at all. He only makes an assemblage of what he picks up that day or of what's around. He is very much interested in jazz. That's his life, jazz. And poetry related to jazz. So he's in a different place. But love, he always has love, right? L-O-V and the E backwards. Every piece of his is signed "Love," L-O-V and the E backwards. George is a love person. He was. I don't know how he's doing now. I love him. He's had so many hardships in his life, and he's lived as the bohemian to the point where-- Now he's getting a little better recognition. He always had good recognition. I never remember when he didn't; Walter was pushing him, and everybody was pushing George. He's had dealers that he wrote manifestos to that they were ruining his life and starving his family. Rolph Nelson, for instance. But George is still, to me, somebody I can love. Like Wally, I can love. I can give love and they can give love back. I think it projects in their assemblages. George is very random. He doesn't care about aesthetics at all. He'll throw a table and chair over here against the wall, stick a

paint can on it and a feather off of that and that's it.

SMITH: Doesn't that just mean he's playing with a different sense of aesthetics?

WAGNER: That's right. But I say, he doesn't have the feeling I have for aesthetics. This is a different set.

SMITH: Were you ever interested in Zen Buddhism?

WAGNER: Yeah, very much.

SMITH: Very much. Is it reflected in any of your work?

WAGNER: Well, I think so.

SMITH: How? Where?

WAGNER: Well, the inner calmness of the pieces, to keep them down to a minimum. The gateless gate, to let things happen and not tangle them up with a lot of busy stuff, and less is more. I think it's all within that. And no dark or light, you know, just one. Yeah, I was involved in Zen Buddhism and Taoism.

SMITH: Those are two different things, very different.

WAGNER: Altogether different, but the same.

SMITH: Maybe, maybe.

WAGNER: Remember the tai chi, that's the balance between the positive and the negative.

SMITH: Upstairs you have your untitled piece that you did in 1985. The devotional piece? Well, I would call it the devotional piece. The untitled assemblage, the wall hanging.

WAGNER: Yeah, the Whiskey Marine series.

SMITH: Yeah, it's part of the Whiskey Marine series. Is that a religious piece?

WAGNER: It didn't start out that way exactly. It is an icon, isn't it? Icons are sort of termed maybe religious.

SMITH: Well, what do you mean by "icon"?

WAGNER: Icons are usually things that are religious paintings and things that are framed within, or that are painted on, like the heads and saints and old Russian icons. Something symbolic of religion. Didn't start out that way, but it wound up that way, didn't it? Because I had no intention of that religious figure ever appearing in there until I made a mistake--or an accident. I was cleaning my brush out and that image appeared. It looks like a Rembrandt or a Raphael. But it is, it's symmetrical, and it has a power of going up.

SMITH: And there are different levels.

WAGNER: Yeah, going upward, ascending.

SMITH: Interior castle kind of concept.

WAGNER: Almost the same configuration of this way, right? Without me knowing it, subconsciously.

SMITH: And the bottom layer has the, what I would call the fetish.

WAGNER: Two feathers.

SMITH: And then the next level has the image that seems

like it's the Madonna.

WAGNER: Yeah, that's the one. That's the accident.

SMITH: Then you have the circle, the abstraction.

WAGNER: There's a belt buckle.

SMITH: We'll talk about the Whiskey Marine series next Sunday in more detail. Peter Plagens, in his book The **Sunshine Muse**, talks about the sixties as a period of contention in Los Angeles art between funk art and what he calls the "L.A. Look," which is [Edward] Ruscha, [Jim] Dine, [Larry] Bell, [Craig] Kauffman--the plastic technogloss, technofetish kind of thing. Were you aware of there being at that time, in the sixties, of there being struggle for market, or a struggle for audience, between assemblage work, funk art work, and the polish-plastic kind of work that the--and the neo-Pop Art?

WAGNER: Yeah, well, I never paid much interest to it because I wasn't that much interested in Bob [Robert] Irwin, or Kauffman, or Larry Bell. But I liked Larry Bell's early works, and I liked Bob Irwin's early works. I liked all those guys' early work. But they're all in the "syndicate," you know. They're part of the "syndicate," again. There you go, you see. And they were pushing a movement; they were pushing the "Cool School," it was called.

SMITH: Or the L.A. Look is how Plagens refers to it.

WAGNER: They called it the "Fairfax Finish" and the "Fetish Finish" and the "Cool School." It had a lot of different nicknames to it, but it was basically all those guys with the Ferus Gallery; it was the same group.

SMITH: All right.

WAGNER: It was the shock value, basically. Like minimalist: People were so bored with looking at art that they thought it would be a good idea to shock them by doing minimal stuff, like laying boards on the floor or making glass icebergs or things of plastic.

SMITH: But is it a shock? Isn't that stuff less controversial than the stuff that you were doing or--

WAGNER: I didn't even look, it bored me so much. I didn't even realize the fact that it was there, you know. Because I don't come from that kind of a place. It's all right.

SMITH: But something like, say, the L.A. [Los Angeles] **Free Press** would be promoting more artists like you, the assemblage artists, while the L.A. **Times** would be more interested in Irwin, Kauffman, and Ruscha. Is that correct?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Is that how you saw it?

WAGNER: Right.

SMITH: So, in a sense, it's the establishment versus the counterculture.

WAGNER: Yeah. Well, you know, at that particular time when all this came into being, that was just before the pop art school, they had to go through some kind of a system. They still think it's alive, these guys; they still believe that there still is a minimalist-- Larry Bell knows better. I think he's gotten out of it. He shows his stuff, but he's not doing that kind of work anymore. He's doing vapor prints from what he used for his dichroic filter glass through the vacuum chamber. I was there the day in Taos in his studio when he developed his first print in the vacuum chamber by taking in the molecular structure of the paper and it turns into a prism. He walked by the print, he had it masked off, so he looked this way and it changes colors like a dichroic filter print. He was so excited, I don't think he ever made another iceberg the rest of his life, because he's got enough of them stored away. Who's going to buy those icebergs? Only museums. Nobody else needs them. Big glass pieces and heavy, beveled-- And architects, they've got enough glass now, I don't think they need those. Architecture today, they're doing some nice buildings, I think, like a few with glass and mirrors. But after all, when did this all start anyway, with Bauhaus or something? Or [Piet] Mondrian? Way back, I think. When the plastic world came in, I think there were different things to do with plastic, I suppose.

There's no soul in it for me. I mean, to me it's soulless art. And mechanical. Might as well-- Cold. We were doing our funk and our assemblage over on this side, which would be the dead opposite of what they were doing with all their slick, polished surfaces.

SMITH: Why isn't there room for--

WAGNER: And yet there was a combination between them that worked out. We had the "cool and funk" school, and we had "cool and funk" exhibitions where we used both.

SMITH: Where were those exhibitions?

WAGNER: Oh, I was in a lot of them in different places.

SMITH: In museums?

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Which museums?

WAGNER: Well, I remember we had one in Long Beach [Museum of Art]. [Arthur] Secunda put it together. Tony Delap and a lot of people in like it that. Where else was there one? Oh, there was one in Laguna [Beach] in that museum.

SMITH: The way Plagens writes about it, it's as if there was not room for both schools.

WAGNER: Plagens says that? Well, I don't believe much of what he says, anyway. I'm not a great lover of his writing. He's quite destructive. As a matter of fact, he made it a point one time to say that-- Somebody asked him about assemblage and he said, "Well, there isn't any more

to say about it. Just close the door."

SMITH: Yeah. Well--

WAGNER: I'm not with him at all on that. I'm a person to perpetuate assemblage; I'm not here to close the door on it. He had a handful of friends and he tried to promote them through the **Sunshine Muse**. That was basically the whole thing; write a book.

SMITH: Let's discuss a little bit of the paintings. **Funeraria, Death of Angel's Flight, Devil's Workshop, To an Unknown Angel, Metamorphoses**: they seem--that group of paintings seems very different from the paintings of yours I've seen before. It's like a sudden--

WAGNER: The **Metamorphoses** and this one--

SMITH: And **Devil's Workshop**; a sudden change from what you were doing previously, either the **Ahora** or the **Nebraska Speedway [Windmill]**.

WAGNER: 'Sixty-two?

SMITH: 'Sixty is when-- **Devil's Workshop** is 1960; **Funeraria** is 1960.

WAGNER: Yeah. And the other one? What was the **Metamorphoses**?

SMITH: **Metamorphoses** is '66, and **Unknown Angel** is '67.

WAGNER: There was a change there because what I was doing was taking-- **Devil's Workshop** and some of these are very related to death, **Death of Angel's Flight**, and **Funeraria**

being a funeral parlor. What happened in the **Metamorphoses** and these paintings, there's a transition going on that took place with-- That symmetrical painting, like my fetishes that I do now, the Whiskey Marine, are sort of symmetrical icons and not rambling. I did symmetrical assemblage at that time, too. Like **Death's Diameter**, which is a piece that we don't have here but was in Santa Barbara, about Artaud, the one I did about Antonin Artaud. Same format and shapes as in the **Metamorphoses**, only it's a piece of assemblage. It was actually the same-- Where here, these were a carryover from my vertical assemblage **From the Sea**, you know, where I was working more linear shapes.

SMITH: In this case, it seems like your early wall hangings, you're taking the ideas you were working with in painting and transposing them into assemblage.

WAGNER: That's what was happening.

SMITH: But now and around 1960, it's working the other way: The assemblages are the primary inspiration and then you're reinterpreting those ideas into paintings.

WAGNER: Sort of like that.

SMITH: Sort of like that. None of these paintings are nonobjective. They all have a--

WAGNER: They're not nonobjective, no. They all have a narrative of something.

SMITH: But do you expect the person that looks at the painting to be able to intuit that narrative?

WAGNER: Well, like that painting down there, I've even got the tracks of Angel's Flight in it. If they study it a little bit they'll see the old Angel's Flight downtown. The tracks coming down where the cars passed with the white paper flowers on the cross, like in Mexico decorating this cross with tracks. I figured that they'd never put it back when they took it down there. You know, Angel's Flight, it was on Third Street. And I knew they'd never--they said they would. But I painted it at that time when they tore it down. That's why I call it **Death of Angel's Flight**, because--

SMITH: But what if we took away the name tag, if we just ripped away all the name tags, the titles, and just looked at it?

WAGNER: Well, that's something else again. But I don't have that in mind with my work, basically. I do have a narrative.

SMITH: The **Devil's Workshop**: what's the narrative in that one?

WAGNER: Well, you can see he's very busy spinning his whole trap and web in here. He's sitting in the middle, almost center, with his tail, and his workshop is all the labyrinths and the tower. It's almost like the Tower of

Babel. See, all the arches and doors, and the mesas and cliffs and stairs. It's like a city hanging in the sky practically.

SMITH: In these paintings your palette has changed considerably too, it seems.

WAGNER: Oh, you mean the colors?

SMITH: Yeah, the colors.

WAGNER: Yeah. Sometimes these two are related. In the Mexico period they're dark.

SMITH: Your previous paintings have been much brighter.

WAGNER: The big one. [Ahora]

SMITH: Yeah, the big one.

WAGNER: They were earlier.

SMITH: Much, much brighter and suddenly your paintings become earth colors.

WAGNER: Well, this is the third death--I'm trying to get through, going through the cycles of being an artist and then being reborn with new work. I'm painting about death in the Nebraska Speedway [series], or something else. I wanted to get that mood of death fixture almost, within the work.

SMITH: Now, is this-- You had been experimenting with abstract expressionism for a while or abstract expressionist forms?

WAGNER: Yeah. These are after those upstairs. Those

upstairs are '58. I would call those abstract expressionism. **Nebraska Speedway Windmill.**

SMITH: What was significant to you about abstract expressionism? What was it that you took out of your study--

WAGNER: Well, when I was into Zen, I guess. It was just don't think; don't have any mind; just do it, you know, action without any reason.

SMITH: That's surrealism as well, of course.

WAGNER: I know. They put [Arshile] Gorky and they put [Jackson] Pollock and they put all these guys as surrealists in books. They're no more surrealists than I am. They put them in there as that.

SMITH: The automatic painting aspect.

WAGNER: The surrealist movement-- They put Pollock in the-- Well, actually what it amounts to is you're just letting it go. Abstract expressionism: letting go and making a huge amount of chaos, walking away from it and coming back and organizing your chaos into a moving thing. So it moves and everything relates.

SMITH: Are you concerned with perception as a subject in your art?

WAGNER: Well, the **Nebraska Speedway** was definitely a concept of a poor guy that lived in Topanga Canyon near a windmill, named Rod Elger. I think he was one of the first

beats that ever was. Somebody gave him five thousand magazines going back to 1897, old **Harper's Bazaars**, and all these magazines stacked up. He didn't know where to put them; he had them all stacked around his windmill out in the yard. Way up high on the road that went up to his place--it was a dirt road--when they took the magazines up in a truck, the truck wouldn't make it to the top of the hill. So the sheriffs came to remove the blockage, and he released the brakes and the truck ran right over the sheriff and mashed him almost into the ground. [laughter] All this weight.

SMITH: And the sheriff was almost--

WAGNER: Yeah, the other sheriff came up and was going to arrest Rod for having this truck full of magazines running over the sheriff's truck. Well, it wasn't his fault. They didn't know how they were ever going to get the magazines up the hill because they were like this in the truck. Can you imagine that? That's a lot of magazines.

SMITH: So they were all tilted-- They were all in the back of a--

WAGNER: Well, it was a high--it was a ton-and-a-half truck, you know? So Bob [Robert] DeWitt came up the hill; we finally got the whole thing worked out so we could carry all the magazines up, pass them up the hill to each other and stack them up in his yard in front of his windmill. That's when I got thinking, what would happen if we had a north wind in Topanga Canyon and all these magazines were flying all over Topanga Canyon coming down off the Nebraska Speedway Windmill? So all those whites in there are magazines in the wind, you see, and paper flying. And the windmill's in there. You can see the shape if you look, the red windmill. He killed himself up there, incidentally. He jumped off the cliff. He was so depressed one day he jumped off the cliff and died. Rod

Elger. And he had a little wagon, a toy red wagon, and he used to drag it down the canyon full of magazines trying to sell magazines to people from his pile. He was an intellectual, completely. And I liked him a lot. He built me-- He left me with a ball of steel like this, scrap iron like this, just tangled scrap iron. And he said, "I'm leaving this with you. This is a self-portrait." That's the way he felt. Like he was tied up like a bunch of iron and steel, tense. That's how the **Nebraska Speedway** [**Windmill**] was created, from around that.

SMITH: Now, your Mexican drawings, which are from the same period, are--

WAGNER: Mexican.

SMITH: Mexican. They're very different. There's nothing-- They're very objective; they're very graphic; they're very easy to--

WAGNER: If I'm going to record something like a fiesta, I want it to be a fiesta, and I want to be able to see what I'm recording for future reference. So these drawings are sort of things to work around as a point of departure for using imagery and symbols and remembering all of the-- And the feeling of that fiesta, that I was there. I didn't take a photograph of it because you never would get what you want with a photo. I was inside of the fiesta at night. I drew those when I came back, not there, from what

I saw and felt.

SMITH: And you wanted a visual representation of--

WAGNER: Well, I want to be able to recognize the fact that this is a cemetery and not a bakery, and that this one's a fiesta with the dolls of fire, the black forms that they have fireworks on and get under and run all around and they blow up. That's the fiesta of the Virgin of Soledad, with the patron saint, and the procession, and the castillo with the bamboo wheels. And that's the Soledad church with all the Zapotec Indians at night. The same fiesta. The twenty-third of December.

SMITH: How important is draftsmanship to your painting?

WAGNER: To my painting?

SMITH: Yeah, in your paintings.

WAGNER: Well, I don't paint that much anymore, but I never worried about it too much, you know?

SMITH: Back then, in the period of your--

WAGNER: Abstract expression, you don't worry too much about draftsmanship, do you?

SMITH: Not usually, no.

WAGNER: And when they come out of your inner consciousness, it's very hard to sit down and methodically draw out something out of your inner consciousness right off the bat. It evolves on the painting as it comes from the subconscious. The thought and what's inside of you is

recorded and passes through your subconscious right out into your hands into the work. It's not restricted by technicalities of drawing on a painting like that. Not this way. It's a different thing if you're making still lifes or landscapes. Then you want them to look real, you have to paint them real. Then you have to worry about the perspective, and the drawings, and the trees, and the flowers and the whatnot for a landscape that you don't need in abstract or impressionist painting.

SMITH: Now, you have a box assemblage called **Mexico** that you did in '68.

WAGNER: That's also related to these fireworks. Castillos there, the tower. In the drawing-- A wheel is in that assemblage. And that's also a very contemplative piece. A sort of a meditation box. It was done in a series I was working on about-- What's the--what date?

SMITH: 'Sixty-eight.

WAGNER: 'Sixty-eight, right after I got married to Virginia [Copeland Wagner]. I was very much into meditation, with mandalas and whatnot. Sort of a mandala.

SMITH: And a kind of peyote-altar shape to it.

WAGNER: Well, that's at home, the peyote altar. But in the same series. There's a lot of those about-- The film company, the producer, up in Hollywood--

SMITH: FilmFair? You mean FilmFair?

WAGNER: No. I have it [**Peyote Altar**] in my collection. They have about six or seven pieces in New York. Metromedia [Inc.], in their collection they have these in Hollywood and New York, related pieces to this. They have an incredible collection at Metromedia, one of the best. If you can ever get in to see it.

SMITH: Here [**in Mexico**] it seems like you're combining Christian and non-Christian motifs.

WAGNER: Well, it's a spiritual piece, but yet it has some humor added in it with that truck flattened out on the bottom. It's like maybe-- In Mexico there are truck drivers and bus drivers and whatnot, they always--first thing they do is they pray before they take off, because usually they go down the mountain at night with no lights, and they coast. And they hope to make it to the bottom, because with the lights off, they save electricity. When the engine's off and they have the lights on, then they're going to wear down the battery, so they shut everything down and coast all the way down the mountain. They start at the top with a prayer to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and when they reach the bottom they stop and they pray for helping them. That truck is sort of a symbol of travel, and it's so flat, you know. It's a wonderful truck. I found it in Quilquilpán in front of a library. It must have been run over a hundred times in Michoacán.

SMITH: Did you ever feel uncomfortable using images and objects and symbols of other cultures of which you were not really a part, you're just an observer?

WAGNER: No. Well, I don't use any symbols to amount to anything like that. I don't use other people's art.

SMITH: But you're using elements of other people's art.

WAGNER: Such as?

SMITH: Well, the fireworks, the folk art.

WAGNER: The fireworks wheel?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: Well, that's off of a total thing. It's nothing different than using a cross from a cemetery or a lamp from there or--

SMITH: But that lamp is part of your culture, and the cross from the cemetery and the fireworks wheel are not part of your culture.

WAGNER: That fireworks wheel is a castillo, right?

SMITH: Yeah. It's Mexican culture, not North American.

WAGNER: Well, I was in Mexico when I did it. These are found objects from Mexico, not from America, right?

SMITH: But you were exploring non-European--

WAGNER: I wouldn't possibly be able to use any art-- I can't stand to use art, like sculpture made by the Mayans or sculpture-- Any form of anything like that, I couldn't use it; it's too corny, you know.

SMITH: But isn't there an aspect of American artists who are in conflict with their own culture, their own society, they go to a place like Mexico to find a culture which has deeper roots, is more closely connected to the earth and the life cycle, and then in a sense, as some people would argue, rip off elements of that culture--

WAGNER: True.

SMITH: --without returning anything and without--

WAGNER: Well, I'm not interested in that aspect. I could find that wheel in the middle of the dump here, you know. But I just happened to find it in Mexico, and I found all the objects there in Mexico. That's why I call it Mexico, because it is Mexico. Even the lottery tickets on the side are Mexico. There's nothing in there that's not from Mexico. But it has nothing to do with any culture of Mexico. It hasn't got anything to do with Aztecs, Mayans. And I wouldn't use it anyway, because I don't like their images. I don't use other people's sculpture or carved animals or-- That gets pretty kitschy, you know. I'm very careful about what kind of objects I use, that I don't ever come up with a whole good object of some kind of art.

SMITH: But again, in the Topanga area, the beat culture, isn't there a romanticization of non-Western cultures that's in a way kind of exploitative?

WAGNER: Yeah, yeah.

SMITH: Escaping your own society.

WAGNER: But I couldn't possibly use somebody else's culture like that. Because I see so much-- I see boxes and assemblages where they put a figure of a jade owl, for example, or a carved soapstone figure next to something else. I couldn't do that, ever.

SMITH: But in **Fetish**, aren't you dealing with American Indian religious ideas, artistic ideas?

WAGNER: There's nothing American Indian in there, is there?

SMITH: What about the use of the feathers?

WAGNER: It's piano parts. The feathers have to do with birds, not to do with Indians, do they? And the piano parts, there's nothing in there that-- I don't have any Indian turquoise symbols in there, any of their jewelry, or any of the things that they do.

SMITH: What about the ideas within it? Aren't they relating to-- There's nothing?

WAGNER: I have no idea. It's a fetish.

SMITH: What is a fetish, then?

WAGNER: A fetish is something that is looked upon as-- either held, cherished, loved, worshiped or--what else?-- felt. You can have an obsession with a fetish, can't you?

SMITH: Yeah. Well--

WAGNER: People have shoe fetishes and foot fetishes and silk underwear fetishes. All kinds of fetishes. A fetish is something that you kind of pray to, right?

SMITH: Yeah. In the pre-Christian, pre-monotheistic religions.

WAGNER: But a fetish can also be a rabbit's foot for good luck.

SMITH: It was a place where a spirit dwelled.

WAGNER: Right. It can be something that stuck on the side of an airplane that you pat before you take off to give you a safe trip. There's all kinds of talismans and fetishes.

SMITH: So what are you trying to do in that box **Fetish**, in the assemblage box **Fetish**?

WAGNER: That is a fetish.

SMITH: Well, what makes it a fetish?

WAGNER: Because it's not a-- Because of the relationship of the way it is. Its just a fetish. It's got a lot of power objects in it, right?

SMITH: Well, what are power objects?

WAGNER: Well, my power objects are probably different from yours. Bones and feathers and things like [that] are power objects.

SMITH: Okay.

WAGNER: Where to you maybe power objects are something else. More fetishes I've done in this show, or in my other

show, where I have lots of fetishes.

SMITH: What makes an object a power object for you?

WAGNER: Something about the way you pick up the object. In the bones and the feathers, there's something that gives you a certain energy through them.

SMITH: Are the shoes in Sir Deauville power objects?

WAGNER: They can be.

SMITH: But are they?

WAGNER: Not to me. They're aesthetically visual.

SMITH: Are the nails in HTG [26], are those power--

WAGNER: Nails are always protective symbols to me.

SMITH: So they are power objects in that.

WAGNER: They're power objects. Like that wheel; it's a very powerful thing.

SMITH: So it's not an aesthetic-- Its physical form makes it a power object, not its aesthetic use.

WAGNER: No, you can't do that. It's an unconscious-- You know, some people can pick up something and they can feel the vibrations within it in their hand, right? Just take them apart, you know. They've got to throw it away.

SMITH: Are the piano parts power objects for you in **Two Loves**?

WAGNER: Well, it's the fact that I love pianos. I mean, broken pianos, not new ones. I wouldn't want a new one. I used to smash up the new ones: [**Octaves's**] Piano

Brokerage. [laughter]

SMITH: Right.

WAGNER: The key to the whole thing, piano keys.

SMITH: But, say in the period in your trip to Mexico, the period when you went to Arizona, I mean, it's a long period of your life, the manufactured boxes such as **Mexico** and the **Fetish**, the assemblages, are you looking for roots, roots to replace the ones that you had?

WAGNER: The ones I had here?

SMITH: Yeah.

WAGNER: That's all I have left of certain things. For periods.

SMITH: Yeah. At those periods of time, was it part of a search for a replacement?

WAGNER: Well, there are, but-- Oh, yeah, someplace. But I could-- That painting there [**Squaw Fight**], that could never be replaced, could it?

SMITH: No.

WAGNER: That was done a long time ago. Even the boards on it are nice, the frame. That's the original boards I put on it. That one down there, it's a very powerful painting, the **Funeraria**. I remember the funeral parlors in Mexico where the coffins are all like stairs inside of the building. You just go in and buy one and take it home. You don't have to take it to the mortician.

SMITH: But in terms of your art, in terms of your life-style, in terms of the kind of culture that was being created in places like Topanga, were you so disgruntled, disgusted with the culture of the United States that you were looking to import from other places such as Mexico, elements to build a new culture?

WAGNER: Where? Here?

SMITH: No, in the United States, here.

WAGNER: You mean the comparison? Or I don't understand. I'm not hearing you very well.

SMITH: Oh. When you went to Mexico, were you looking at the elements of that culture and of Indian cultures and of Asian cultures with the view of finding things that were more human to you, more powerful to you, that you would then bring back to the United States and use as elements to build a new culture here? Are you following me?

WAGNER: Yeah I do, but--

SMITH: Is there a critique of American culture, you know, a turning away from American culture as you saw it? Not becoming Mexican, but looking for things that then could be understood and fit in here.

WAGNER: Well, that's a difficult one. Because when I-- When you go to Mexico, you don't expect anything to be like the United States at all; it just doesn't exist. Nothing's the same. In Mexico you feel a lot freer about things.

You can walk where you want to, and-- Free as nature's child. The people are friendly, everybody helps you, and there's so much beauty. The towns and the villages are old, and there's an integration. You never find anything in Mexico like you find here in L.A. I don't think you find anything in the whole world like you find in L.A. It's the worst-looking city in the whole world, I think. But there's no reason to bring anything from Mexico back to here except your own mind. When you come back-- When I go to Mexico, I live. Every minute. Because there's so much to see and so much to feel and do, and walk. The architecture and everything about it is European. I come back here, this is just a place to sit down and do your work and not become related to much of anything, because there's not much here to be related to. There's no roots left in this town; they've all been pulled out. The only thing that will probably put the roots back in this city is that half of Mexico's come to L.A. Right now they're bound down by the immigration and whatnot, but if they could ever get loose from all their hangups, I think that L.A. would be a pretty good place if they could bring some of their culture over here. They try, slowly, to set up restaurants and things, but there's too much in the way, too much garbage here. And too much mix--races, and all these things that are going on. When you're in Mexico, there's

only Mexicans. When you're here, there's everybody. That's the difference. So you have all the cultures here. You only have one to worry about in Mexico, it's Mexican. There's no other culture. A few Chinese and a handful of Germans, but they don't get into anything except to run maybe Chinese laundries. But you know you're in a different place immediately; all you have to do is cross the border and you know you're out of the United States. It's a show, Mexico. Somebody wrote a book once called **Don't Stop the Show**, just about Mexico. And it's true, it is a show. The whole thing is a big performance, a big happening, a wonderful assemblage. You never find that here. It's done. This place is finished, industrialized to the point where it's dirty and corrupt and a war zone-- no love. Mexico has love. But when the Mexicans come here that have been so pure by the forests and by the nature and by all of the things they've lived with, they come here and they get contaminated. In order to make more money, the next thing you know, they fall right into the rest of the system.

But when you go there as an artist, and you look at it from that aspect and from what you can do with it as an artist, how you feel about it-- I know guys that go to Mexico and all they do is paint abstract paintings. They don't do anything else. They don't even know what's going

on in Mexico. It's just a place to go to work. And there's other guys who come back feeling something. Well, I'm not going to come back feeling--myself, personally--I'm not going to come back painting men under cacti with big hats, and deserts, and that typical American idea of what a Mexican is, the land of mañana. I'm not about to do those things. What I went down there for was to work and to feel. And whatever came out down there was-- I didn't go down there with a prearranged idea of what was going to happen. It just happens. Let it happen. Same way in Europe. No matter where you go. I go empty-handed and start like I've never-- I have nothing. No prearranged ideas. Then you can grow. Otherwise you're going to be stuck in the same pattern forever, you'll never get out of it. You'll be doing the same thing in twenty years that you're doing now, you know. That's not very interesting.

SMITH: Did you study Jungian psychology much? Were you interested in that? We discussed [Carl] Jung a little bit before, but were you interested in universal symbols?

WAGNER: Jungian psychology? Yeah, I liked it, because it was very much related to Navaho myth and to Indian--I mean India India--and Taoism, Buddhism, and alchemy and all of those kind of symbols that make art, you know. As far as looking at it from the aspect of psychological diagnosis, I could care less. I like the dream state, but what the

dream was telling me I have no idea. I was only working from the dream like I was using the symbols and the images. I wasn't psychoanalyzing anything, and I wouldn't know how to psychoanalyze anything. But the dream state was important because it really helps to-- It gives you a lot of things in dreams that you would never possibly get otherwise. But Jung had all the symbols. He was a man of the cosmic consciousness, and of cosmic duality, and universal harmony and all of the four directions, and these things that are comparative to all the other groups of the primitives. So everything ties together with that. They're in here, all of them: [pointing to individual pieces in the exhibit] the quaternity, the quaternity, the quaternity, the quaternity, the quaternity, the quaternity, the quaternity. In every piece almost, there's that universal harmony. Or the movement of the circle on that one, and that went along with the quaternity. Oh, and there's the circle. [pointing to another piece] Circle. They all relate.

TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 18, 1987

SMITH: Gordon, we're at the Edge Gallery today and this-- What is the name of the series of works that's here at the Edge?

WAGNER: The Whiskey Marine.

SMITH: Where did that name come from?

WAGNER: Well, basically, I got the name by using-- A lot of this work comes from along the coast at the sea, and marine types of pieces found in the ocean. There are two ways to look at that title: One is whiskey marine, which is whisk it up off the beach, or wiskey marine, either way. What it actually amounts to is I was very fond of these objects that I kept finding on the beach, and they projected a whole new set of imagery into my head about these pieces.

SMITH: How many pieces are in the show?

WAGNER: I believe there are forty-one.

SMITH: In what period of time did you make these?

WAGNER: Over a period of the last two years.

SMITH: Only in the last two years.

WAGNER: [At] Angel's Gate [Cultural Center] in San Pedro, in my studio.

SMITH: Where did the materials come from, again?

WAGNER: Well, 90 percent came from along the beaches along

San Pedro, from Cabrillo Beach and White Point, and some from a few other beaches. And a few around the streets of San Pedro. Along the sea and out of the-- They get very well polished, and they turn so many different wonderful, polychrome textures being in the water, then thrown up on the reefs to dry, and then they go out again, and they get spun around some more until the wood really takes on beautiful textures. That is, for the objects themselves, they're among the seaweed on the dry beach. Some pieces have probably been lying there for years, and I wasn't-- It's hard to say because they were so weathered.

SMITH: Did you alter the pieces at all?

WAGNER: No, I haven't altered anything. They're pure, from the found object.

SMITH: The colors are the same?

WAGNER: The colors are exactly the same. I haven't altered anything. I didn't paint any of them, they're just-- That's why I like them, because they're unaltered and because they are just the way I found them. The juxtaposition of a few of these objects relates to the whole, not with any preconceived idea.

SMITH: The series as a whole or the whole each--

WAGNER: The series as a whole as well as each piece.

SMITH: So did you sand any of the objects?

WAGNER: Nothing.

SMITH: Nothing? Absolutely nothing?

WAGNER: Nothing. Nothing is sanded; nothing is painted or touched up.

SMITH: What about pieces like the Polaroid; that's in--

WAGNER: No, that Polaroid was--

SMITH: You didn't rip that or--

WAGNER: That's the way I found the Polaroid.

SMITH: Shot at Twenty Fathoms.

WAGNER: And I didn't cut the Polaroid; it was just like that. I just fastened it into the back of this wonderful contraption. The camera mechanism was right from the sea there, the Polaroid was on the sea.

SMITH: So in a sense these are like assemblage drawings in a way. They came together--bits and pieces came together very quickly, very sketchlike.

WAGNER: They don't exactly go together quickly, because sometimes each piece that I bring back often relates to four or five pieces that I've found. It's the exact-- I know when it happens. I think that a good way to explain these pieces, like with any piece of creativity, it's like you're thrown out on an island, right, and there's nothing on the island that's bare, and that's what the piece is. You have to do the best you can with what's on the island in order to create something from it. Each one of these pieces is sort of an island in the beginning, with nothing

on it, and all of a sudden one piece relates to another in some sort of an alchemical or magical way until it is a proper composition.

SMITH: How do these pieces relate-- You had a piece in the other show at San Pedro, **Fetish**. How do these pieces relate to the kind of work you were doing at the time you did **Fetish**, which was in the late sixties, early seventies?

WAGNER: The piece **Fetish**. I'm trying to remember which piece that was. Was that the--in a box?

SMITH: It was in a box. It had feathers.

WAGNER: With a black circle?

SMITH: Yes.

WAGNER: These would relate very well to that piece, a little bit different time, 1972 to '84, '85. But there is a similarity with the objects and their juxtaposition at that time, yeah.

SMITH: Well, even the choice of the word "fetish," which reappears in some of the pieces here, implies something. We discussed that a little bit last time, but--

WAGNER: What is a fetish?

SMITH: Well, no. What makes you decide to call one piece a fetish over another?

WAGNER: Well, because a fetish is actually an object of power, right? Or an icon. It is beyond-- It has a certain spiritual, mystical quality to it, and some of my pieces

acquire that, unknowing to my--the beginning. [tape recorder off]

SMITH: Well, since you did the work, that earlier work, you converted to Catholicism. How has that changed the kind of imagery that you're working with in these kinds of pieces and in your relationship with, quote unquote, "power objects"?

WAGNER: Actually, I don't think it's changed my imagery at all from the very beginning until right now. No, I don't believe so.

SMITH: Don't you look-- If you look at the object and you say that it has power, don't you think about that in a different way, then?

WAGNER: As a power object?

SMITH: Yes. In the sixties you were involved in a paganistic, animistic kind of approach to--

WAGNER: Well, I think that the icons of the Christian church are power images, just a different sort of power image. But I have symbology in here related to Christian symbology, but I had it in my early works before I ever converted to Catholicism, when I was into Buddhism and Taoism. So I don't think-- I have crosses; I had crosses in my works that were back in the fifties, and earlier even. I can't really see that that would be a-- They're not good-luck pieces, if that's what you mean,

superstitious pieces; I don't believe in superstition anymore. I used to carry rocks and stones in my pockets and rely on those kinds of energies, fetishes, that kind of fetish. I don't do that anymore. I used to; if I had a cup of coffee with some bubbles on the top, I'd get out my rubbing stone and I would pray for money coming. But now I don't do that; if I get bubbles on my cup, that's fine. I don't have that image for it anymore, and I don't think about it from that aspect. I've kind of grown out of the aid of those kinds of images to control my life. I have much more freedom now than I had then.

SMITH: In the pieces you juxtapose, and in some ways create equivalencies between, the cross, the mandala, the arrow, the dangling feathers, and that's something that you've been working with for a long time. But is there a difference between it in this series--

WAGNER: A long time; way, way back. Yeah.

SMITH: --in terms of those juxtapositions and how they worked?

WAGNER: Yeah, exactly. I've never tied it together with anything to do with it, any more than the universal harmony of the quaternity or bringing all of the energies of the earth together in harmony and beauty and love.

SMITH: Would you consider these pieces religious art?

WAGNER: No, I wouldn't call them that at all. I would

call them poetic. They're using objects instead of words for poetry for a certain essence of a moment. It's like writing a small poem with maybe a few lines; the objects would be the lines of the poem.

SMITH: Well, let's explore that a little bit with some of the particular pieces. What about **Hook and Eye**?

WAGNER: The **Hook and Eye**. Well, it's obvious that there's a wonderful hook in that piece. That's a pun; I use a lot of humor in my work. This happens to be an eye with a hook on a very, very beautifully organized fetish background with the feathers and the square nails. No, that has leather, but the patina. I couldn't resist it because the two integrate so well together, a hook and an eye. Actually, literally an eye. It's a pun, but it's a little piece of poetry.

SMITH: And **The Undersea Log**?

WAGNER: **The Undersea Log** is probably one of the most magical pieces that I've done, due to the fact that the color, the shape-- And the little book that's defaced by being under the water, it could be a log to anything. And the almost decapitated magnifying glass would be very difficult to read through on the top. The textures of that piece-- It's one of my favorite pieces in the whole exhibition, **Undersea Log**. It's so simple, and it says so much.

SMITH: What about Icon to Great Railroads?

WAGNER: That piece was done with the idea of using some of the old things that I'd found along the railroad tracks, like the dynamite--the caps that they used to use on the rails to stop the train. They'd run over it so that it told the engineer where the end was. Those old cap boxes and my car bands coming down that they'd put around the boxcar doors to seal it. A lot of images from freight trains and railroads, which I've always loved anyway. To build this as an icon to great railways, because there's different ones in there that are marked in there on the car bands, plus a few hanging blocks with numbers-- All that gave me a feeling, I'd say, of railroads when I did it. I could project where I'd picked these up on the tracks and the way it was when they used those old caps. These boxes are probably a hundred years old, eighty years old.

SMITH But there you've superimposed the star, the mandala--

WAGNER: Yes.

SMITH: --the dangling fetish.

WAGNER: Yeah, right.

SMITH: Not exactly a cruciform.

WAGNER: No. It's back to the fetish and images of that again, back to icons. These things are very powerful objects, you know. Very powerful. They live one at a time

or in a group as a family.

SMITH: Then you have something which seems like it's social commentary, which is unusual for you: Shot at **Twenty Fathoms.**

WAGNER: That piece is really a powerful piece, with the Polaroid photograph that has nothing to do with twenty fathoms; I think it's a bicycle leaning against somebody's porch. It was out of-- Whoever took the photo must have been taking it standing on their head or on their side some way, because it doesn't relate at all to the total picture. Then by the time the sea got ahold of it and ate off part of the emulsion-- It was framed within a wonderful camera mechanism that I found right there below Angel's Gate. It's all mounted on an old postcard album of leather, with a keyhole and a few pencils and things jammed into it, and other random things, bits of things, and a hypodermic needle sticking out of it. It is not really a social comment, but it is a very dynamic piece of work. It's really a-- It's almost an icon to chaos, because under the sea, if you were twenty fathoms down, it's quite chaotic.

SMITH: When you use the term chaos and you include a hypodermic needle, aren't you in effect making a social comment?

WAGNER: I hadn't intended it to be; the thing actually just worked in there beautifully. It happened to be

needed. It was a good object for it, but it has nothing to do with a statement as a whole.

SMITH: But it's part of the statement as a whole, central to it.

WAGNER: Yes, it has some relation, but it could be very much diametrically opposed to the whole situation too.

SMITH: Maybe. And **Cabrillo Beach Memories**?

WAGNER: Now, that is another jewel that I picked up all in one day on Cabrillo Beach, right after the Fourth of July. I don't know how I found all those objects and the board and everything at once, but they all fit. The only thing I didn't find down there was the belt clamp, old engine belt clamp, the rusty teeth--the only thing I didn't find off the beach there. But that piece is another powerful piece. Cabrillo Beach is in San Pedro, right below Angel's Gate.

SMITH: To what degree do you re-form, not re-form physically, but re-form spiritually, the objects that you use, their meaning, the imminent meaning within them. Do they retain the feeling that they had when you find them, or is that something that comes out of the composition for you?

WAGNER: Re-form?

SMITH: Change the significance of the objects.

WAGNER: I don't really change the significance of the

objects. The objects are still there, they just are in a different juxtaposition. As I mentioned one time before, they're all old actors and I've given them a new theater. You know, they've been rejected.

SMITH: At the same time you're doing these, you're also working on boxes.

WAGNER: Well, it's very funny about these pieces, because I had given up this sort of work. I was just into boxes, and I hadn't been doing any assemblage of this sort of thing at all.

SMITH: When did you give it up?

WAGNER: Oh, about 1972, '71, around in there. I stopped making found object assemblages like these wall pieces. When I took my studio at Angel's Gate to work in, I had no intention of doing anything like this at all. I used to go down to the beach and go swimming, and I'd walk along the beach, and I'd see these old weathered things. And I'd say, "Oh, I don't need those anymore, I don't do that sort of stuff." And I'd leave them. But one day I found three or four beautiful pieces of wood, and I said, "I can't throw this stuff away, this is incredible. It's so beautiful." So I brought them back up to my studio and I just left them there; I didn't think much about it. I looked at them, and all of a sudden I had this energy come to me: why don't you make some small assemblages? After

all, it will interfere with my boxes, but I can build the assemblages in my studio in San Pedro and build my boxes in my studio in Pasadena, then there'd be no conflict between the two. So every day for two years, well, not every day, whenever I went to San Pedro, I started finding these things. Then I found myself walking in the streets of wherever I was, like walking down the railroad tracks in Pasadena, walking someplace, and I'd find things that related to the things that I was using there. So I got more excited as I went on, and all of a sudden I'd constructed about--I've done about fifty-five, I think. There are forty-one in this exhibition. Fifty-five or sixty. The others were sold.

SMITH: Each piece then-- You were producing a tremendous amount.

WAGNER: I couldn't stop. I was really going. I had a whole run on these things. I was filling up the walls of my studio; I had to make a second level to hang them on, there were so many. [laughter] I was excited with what was happening because they took on a culmination of my earlier works and where I had been. By the time I had been through all the earlier works and left it for a long time, I was-- I already knew what to do. So by getting away from it for awhile, they became much stronger. That series is really a culmination of a whole lot of years of working in

assemblage to get this far. And each composition is-- Artists, they say, "Your composition worked so good. You can take this sort of stuff and nail it to a board, and it doesn't look good, you know." I have no power over how it's there; it comes through me, through the channel; it lays it there for me. I do not judge, it just is. I try to get the thing, the essence, as pure as possible with the least amount of objects.

SMITH: Do these objects remind you of events and places in your past, in your personal history?

WAGNER: Actually, no. They remind me of places I haven't ever been yet, maybe will someday go to. Because I visualize objects that I would like to find, out someplace. I go out with the idea that I'm going to find that object sometime. I'll be walking down a beach or out in the desert, and I'm so tired of walking. I have to go another half-mile and maybe I'll find that object that I'm looking for. Ninety percent of the time I won't, but every now and then if I go another twenty feet, there's the object that I want. It's always been that way. Even when I was a kid, I used to have that feeling, that I had to go a little farther to find it. Because I always looked; I always had one eye on the ground and one eye straight up.

SMITH: "Places that you would like to go to," could you explain that a little bit more?

WAGNER: Well, I don't know where they are, because I've never been there. I can't explain them, but they must be.

SMITH: The playing cards-- In a sense, the playing cards are a relatively new addition to your vocabulary, your visual vocabulary. When did you start getting interested in playing cards?

WAGNER: Using them in my works, about 1971 or '72.

SMITH: Was it here that that interest developed, or was it in Europe?

WAGNER: I think basically it was in Europe that I found that I enjoyed playing cards as an art form.

SMITH: As an art form, not as-- Do they also speak to you as a form of fortune-telling?

WAGNER: No. I'm not the slightest bit interested in playing cards as a game. And Tarot never-- I had the Tarot given to me just once, and that was in 1968. He told me that I would never have to worry about things. I'd work all my life. I'd never have a lot of money, but I would get along and things would be fine. So I left it at that; I never wanted to be canceled out into a new Tarot fortune. [laughter] I left it that way. It was on the good side.

The symbols of the Tarot I like. I mean, I like the art of the Tarot cards, and I like the art of the old

cards. The Belgian cards are beautiful cards, and the Flemish. I like the French cards. I've got whole collections of cards, a box full of different kinds of decks of cards, from Russia, from France, from Mexico and the Spanish. I've got crooked cards and round cards, every shape of cards. I like old cards that have been--

The most exciting thing that ever happened to me was one night I was coming out of a program in Gent, Belgium, where Virginia was the star of the performance. All of us came outside and laying in the street, the wet street, somebody had lost a whole deck of cards, and they were all stretched out there getting wet across the street. They were all these wonderful old face cards. And my friends, about three or four of us, we went out there and started picking the cards up out of the street. I said, "I don't need the numbers, I just want the face cards." They were all wet and soaked, but they were great cards. They symbolize chance to me, cards. That's what-- That's part of what this is all about, the chance. You're actually, when you're putting one of these together, it's like you're playing cards. You're laying down this object, and you're laying this one down, and the chance of it working, the spontaneity of the movement, and the chance. The cards are that way, an aleatory situation. Like the way these old ones-- Wonderful cards. There's not one in there you can

relate to as a certain kind of card because they're defaced. These over here, they have a certain-- That joker back there, the way it's all bent and twisted and three dimensional.

SMITH: Which piece is that?

WAGNER: The Joker.

SMITH: The Joker, right.

WAGNER: And these over here.

SMITH: Icon to a Queen?

WAGNER: Yes. The card, like-- I like jokers because they're the fool. And the fool can either be the spiritual person, the highest energy, or it can be the bottom. Like clowns and like kosharies in Indian dances, where they mess everybody up and play tricks and clown. But they are also the spiritual leaders of the Hopi, and all of these different groups, the Santo Domingo Indians. They're the joker, or the fool; the fool is the name. The fool was always the man who kept the kings and queens happy, the jesters in the courts.

SMITH: Now, you've said before, in fact frequently, that you could have made your work at any time, your work is timeless. What do you mean by that?

WAGNER: Well, what I mean by timelessness is that it doesn't identify to any period or era or epic. My work comes from inside. I'm not protesting against blacks; I'm

not protesting against Mexicans; I'm not interested in wars, protesting against wars. That's time-full. A lot of artists are protesting, making social statements. My work is not social statements. My work is beyond that in context. This piece could have been made a hundred years ago, or it could be made a hundred years from now.

SMITH: But it couldn't have been made a hundred years ago, no artist would have made it a hundred years ago.

WAGNER: But it could have been.

SMITH: But it couldn't have been.

WAGNER: Why not?

SMITH: Because it wasn't in the artists' vocabulary. They didn't even think in those terms.

WAGNER: How do you know that it wasn't? How do you know it wasn't? We don't know that vocabulary, we only know about-- If I say, "Who are the artists in the United States today?" Well, there's Claes Oldenburg, there's Jasper Johns, there's [Robert] Rauschenberg, there's Jackson Pollock, there's [Willem] de Kooning. But what about all the other artists that are back in the hills someplace making things that nobody has ever heard of, never recognized? They're not in national magazines; they're not in the syndicated art world. They could have been making these things. I'm making them; nobody knows about the fact that I'm making them even, in the syndicated art world.

They don't know about it. They'll discover these things someday. They can discover another person that could be doing these sort of things. There were people like [William Michael] Harnett and those type of people who painted these sorts of things, even before the turn of the century, they painted them. And there were people who were making objects, I'm sure, because 1882, that isn't too far back: that was just before, during, the time of the Decadents, right? Yet there were people buried in cellars in Holland and Belgium and these places, they could be building things like this, very simply, but nobody ever discovered them. And the family [might have] said, "Oh, that bunch of junk; nobody wants that," so they burned it up for firewood. They lost it.

SMITH: But, in those pieces like **Cruciform and Skyrocket**, don't you think that besides the shapes in there, you're dealing with forms that were developed in the twentieth century, a kind of approach to visual style, to shape and color.

WAGNER: That's possible, yeah, sure. But I'm not making any social statements with them, and if they're shown in a hundred years, I'm not making any social statement. It's the same then as it is now, right? I'm not making a statement, or--oh, well, that's old hat, that's an era. Right? Any abstract form of art does not tie itself down

to a social statement.

SMITH: But don't you think--

WAGNER: The dadaist and the cubist: The dadaist made social statements, many, but a lot of them didn't. Certainly not [Marcel] Duchamp, certainly not [Francis] Picabia. They didn't make social statements. They made inside-- Their only social statement was to protest, because it was so ridiculous at that time that people thought they were crazy, and that's what they wanted them to think. But we've outgrown that. We've accepted neo-dada. It comes out of the same genre.

SMITH: Doesn't that indicate, then, that what makes something part of time is not simply the social comment but the artistic language that is used too?

WAGNER: Yeah, and the imagery that you use.

SMITH: We look at El Greco differently than his contemporaries looked at him. We see things in his paintings that--

WAGNER: That's right, but El Greco is timeless. That's why he is still here. Things that are dated and put away and brought out for a certain period, like deco art [Art Deco], and that sort of-- And minimalist, that'll all die out; that'll all be gone.

SMITH: That doesn't have any social comment, so it's timeless as well.

WAGNER: I think it has very much of a social content. It ties in with all the architecture of our day, which is just like deco art. The deco art furniture and the deco art sculpture of that time, deco art buildings, they all are in a certain period, so they are tied into the forties, right? But surrealism and dada, they're beyond that because it's from the inside. We're not protesting about something. I'm not protesting at all about anything I ever do. I could care less about what the people are doing out there as far as protesting. If I want to protest, I'll do it, go and physically do it, not get my art involved in it, right. Because then you tie yourself down and limit yourself. Classical music certainly is not social protest. Like Beethoven was not a social protestor in his music, or Mozart. They're timeless; they're classical. But if I get into some of the other--rock singers today, they're doing nothing but protesting. That's time-full. Only now, and then it's gone. Some of the best ones will withstand the loss. There will always be a Bob Dylan and there will always be the Beatles, the ones who were the originators and gave it the poetry of that time. Dylan did a lot of time-full things, but he was good in that era, before everybody came along. Now we're into the punk, that's protest for certain, right? A lot of other new sounds are not protests. Some of the sounds are pure. I

certainly wouldn't call [Iannis] Xenakis or [Krzysztof] Penderecki, or any of those contemporary composers-- They are timeless. You can listen to them in fifty years, a hundred years, they'll sound like they do today. There won't be an era. It's the same with artists. My art is not making social statements, and it's not interested in today. These things are for people who aren't even born yet. We just wait and let the world go by.

SMITH: You don't think that even things that reflect the inner-self are time-centered or time-full, that the self is part of time?

WAGNER: Indirectly, I'm sure. But not enough to bring out that sort of energy and use it and transfer it from your inner consciousness to something that's time-full. It has to remain timeless, to me. Not to everybody. There's lots of artists who do time-full things, great hordes of them. People love those artists because it reminds them of when they were young, and they get these landscapes, "Oh, I used to live near a place like that." And the pretty barns and the oceans and the pretty farms and the countrysides.

SMITH: Who are you talking about?

WAGNER: Andrew Wyeth and people like this. He's got a universal appeal because he ties it down to the way it is, and the way those people remember it. So it's tied to

time. His pieces are not timeless. [René] Magritte is a timeless artist; he was always timeless, the images he used and the situation he put them in.

SMITH: Don't you think that somebody could argue that those fantasies are very particular to the period that he lived in? Somebody who lived a hundred years before would not have imagined those things, or a hundred years later?

WAGNER: Not at all, because the only thing he uses in his imagery is his own house, his own living room, and his own windows for his casements to paint. What he puts in the house has nothing to do with the images around him.

SMITH: No, but couldn't those things that he puts in the house--the juxtapositions that he creates are the juxtapositions, fantasies, that could only exist in the first part of the twentieth century? That could be argued.

WAGNER: He's a twentieth-century man. I imagine he paints what he wants to use as the images. But locomotives coming out of fireplaces, like in the painting **Time Transfixed**, are not exactly seen every day of the week, you know. And those sorts of things. God up over the top of a freight yard with all the trains below, you know. The picture of God in the sky with all of the freight trains in the Brussels railroad station, that is not exactly twentieth century.

SMITH: No? How about his horns on fire and all of these

sorts of things? But he was a twentieth-century artist.

WAGNER: No.

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JANUARY 18, 1987

SMITH: I wanted to ask you if in your Navaho paintings you used reflections of Indian myths, or Indian myth figures, like **The Yei-bi-chai** [also known as **The Navaho Night Chant**] In this series, the Whiskey Marine Series, do you use any Indian mythical materials?

WAGNER: Yes, I might say there were a few pieces that would relate to that era, like when I use feathers and bones. Some of the actual colors of my works relate to some of the old kachinas, the superhuman beings, the dolls, and the colors of the living kachinas. The way they actually made their own dyes and paints, they almost achieved that patina on their masks, in their dances, and whatnot. I've always been fascinated by that patina within the American Indian art and the Eskimo, and all. Even the primitive arts of the Africans, some of them had the color. I think there's probably an unconscious relationship of why I like patina that would be related to that period in my life, because I was very fascinated by the old masks, old Indian artifacts of that time, which I think is a very surrealist image. At one time, André Breton, like so many surrealists, [was a] collector of the old American Indian--They loved American Indian art. At one time, when he lived in America, he gave a tour of about twenty-five colleges on

American Indians, all in French, which is a surrealist act in itself in the United States. [laughter] Power objects often tend to be that finish. As for some of the feathers that hang below and the turquoise pieces, little turquoise stones, symbols of, well, of the sun and the moon, or the yin and the yang, or whatever you want to use. The confrontation of the mating of the hook in the wood over there, it's almost the moon into the earth.

SMITH: Metamorphosis?

WAGNER: Of the peyote ceremony. The way the hook is actually relating and going right into the crescent. The sun went right into the crescent of the moon in harmony. Looking at this exhibition and viewing it, there's, to me, seeing it like this, it has a complete harmony within it. I feel peacefulness in this exhibition, not being jammed with high-chrome colors and slick, shiny, brilliant minimal surfaces. So there's a harmony that I can only achieve from that inner self, which comes through all of my various and sundry spiritual directions unknowingly.

SMITH: What about Taoist or Buddhist imagery, do you use any of that still? Has that continued to--

WAGNER: Well, not actually from the aspect of anything that they've ever used, but there is a-- Same thing, the Taoist and the Navaho-- Taoism and the teachings of the Navaho are almost parallel. After all, they came from the

same part of the world. It's almost the same philosophy. So I would almost say they could be related to the Tao.

SMITH: But in terms of Tao imagery--

WAGNER: No, because I'm not interested, not even interested in the Tao imagery in the sense of Buddhism and all of the refined art of that time.

SMITH: When you use Indian motifs, do they reflect a particular Indian group, or is it Indian in general, Indian myths, that takes--

WAGNER: Well, I don't have any Indian motifs in this whole exhibition. I have fragments of the Indian that came probably from my living there, but nothing designed with the Indian in mind in this exhibition.

SMITH: What about the Mexican images that you used to work with? Are any of these pieces reflecting on your past interest in Mexico?

WAGNER: Yeah, I would say that there would be. Maybe like this piece that you're looking at right here, **The Letter Edged in Black**, with the flower and the cross and the energy-- The heels on each end of the cross with the sole in the center, the cross is the sole. And the hands-- And the heel on each end. That would sort of relate to Mexican imagery. There's a possibility that the one over here with the bones would. It's called the **Soup Bone Fetish**. And certainly the one around the corner that's called **Death**

Hand, where the hand and the bone and death, and then the skull and crossbones button on the top, would all be related back to the death period, I would think, in Mexico. It has certainly none of the Mexican colors as far as the red, yellow, green, the primaries.

SMITH: What about **La Reyna**, that one piece?

WAGNER: **La Reyna**?

SMITH: Yeah, **La Reyna**.

WAGNER: That is a really good icon, that's straight icon with the--actually using the metal **retablo** from the Virgin of Guadalupe in it. She is, after all, the Queen of Mexico. And the spines, the **espinas** they call them in Mexico, the pointed, pronged-looking things that I use in other pieces sometimes, those are actually from around the beaches of San Blas, in the state of Nayarit, where the Coras and the Huicholes wear those around their skirts and dresses. The Mayans used to prick themselves with those to do penance and pull blood from themselves. That's what they were for: during Easter, the **penitentes** prick themselves with those thorns that I've used in some of my pieces. They would relate to Mexico.

SMITH: This is called the Whiskey Marine Series, and it does relate to the San Pedro and Palos Verdes beaches. Do any of these pieces provoke memories from your youth when you were a sailor, a lifeguard, a beach person, the

amusement-zone person?

WAGNER: Yes, the **Bath House, Hap's Bath House**. I remember all those old slats of boards and wood where people changed to go to the sea. They had these old slats in different colors. That's a very beautiful piece, **Hap's Bath House**, because I've used these wonderful textures just for that one. I would say that this piece right directly here, the **Penny Arcade, Monument to the Penny Arcade**, certainly ties into my youth because that money changer, the coin changer, was my money changer when I worked in the penny arcade.

SMITH: Yours personal or one that you saved--

WAGNER: My personal money changer, yes. It really got beaten up and got lost and damaged and rusted. I found it, with parts of the container--it's only got one in it now. Even the pennies that are in it are from that era, the twenties. It's a monument to penny arcades.

SMITH: What about something like **Cabrillo Beach Memories**? Does that resonate in terms of your personal memories?

WAGNER: Not particularly. Not particularly. It was just that day. It was an event; it was right after the Fourth of July, and there were a lot of good things to find.

SMITH: And then the **House of Willem**?

WAGNER: That's a very poetic thing, isn't it? It actually is very random; everything is just there, things are stuck

into it just like they all flew in and hit it. It was a very random piece.

SMITH: But you do have a particular interest in things Dutch and Flemish, don't you? It triggers something.

WAGNER: Yeah.

SMITH: Then there's the juxtaposition of the arrow.

WAGNER: The arrow and the hanging things, and pens and pencils jammed through it. It's real poetry, at least to me.

SMITH: What about Christian imagery? You use it, of course, in **La Reyna**, the crosses everywhere. Are there some pieces that are more religious than others, where the poetic statement is a religious statement?

WAGNER: No, I don't believe so. I haven't considered that.

SMITH: So these are purely secular.

WAGNER: It would be purely subconscious. That **Cruciform and Skyrocket** happened to work well together against those textures. And this, as I say, this one here, **Letter Edged in Black**, with the cross-- I had received a letter edged in black, have you? Years ago, they used to, when someone died, they mailed a letter-- If you got a letter edged in black, it meant that somebody died. You opened it up and they announced it. Those are hard to find, letters edged in black.

SMITH: You just found it on the beach, that particular envelope?

WAGNER Yeah, and a bunch of junk. Somebody's civilization thrown away. The [Soup] **Bone Fetish**, that bone, I thought maybe it was an animal bone, I mean a human bone or maybe something to do with a sea creature. My friend in San Pedro, John Olguin, who's the head of the Cabrillo [Marine] Museum, he told me that during the war, '47, '46, '45, when the battleships came into San Pedro, they used to throw all the meat carcasses over the side. All of the creatures would devour the meat, and the bones would float to the top. He said that at one time Cabrillo Beach had over 8,000 beef bones stacked up on the beach like that. That was one of the beef bones that I found maybe two years ago. It was an incredible bone. That's how it got the title **Soup Bone Fetish**; they were soup bones, they boiled them, you see.

SMITH: Is there any significance to the heel at the top?

WAGNER: No, in that case, the heel just happens to be a beautiful image on the top that works with the tap on the bottom, the steel tap from the shoe hanging below it. Just a nice relationship.

SMITH: Now, when you work with things like this, with junk, throwaways-- You say that your work is timeless, and I think-- You know, putting the content aside, when you

work with these types of materials, isn't what's happening also a meditation on time, on history, on the things that preceded us?

WAGNER: You mean if you actually analyze the object and where it relates to time?

SMITH: An assemblage is an assemblage by what it's constructed out of. In addition to the poetic statement that it's making, isn't it also a statement about time and change in our society?

WAGNER: Well, if you wanted to look at it that way and take these assemblages piece by piece and take them apart and look at each object you could relate to time. I don't think I have anything in this exhibition that's newer than maybe, oh, maybe twenty-five years old. Most everything is older. I'm not interested in plastics or any of the new shapes or images. They're all older, older objects completely.

SMITH: But you do use plastics in **Shot at Twenty Fathoms**, the hypodermic needle is--

WAGNER: You mean the photograph?

SMITH: The photograph and the hypodermic needle.

WAGNER: Well, in that case, yes. But I'm talking about physical objects like bones and handles and pieces like that one. These old standing pieces, that's very old stuff on here: old whipple tree hook, and rods, and pieces from

old wheels--the penny arcade conductor's money changer goes back to the twenties. They don't make those wheels like that anymore on the carbohaulic calculator. Those are old baby buggy wheels or wagon wheels, a toy wagon in the early times, in the past-- So if you took the pieces one by one and took each part out of them, you would find that all of these things go back in time. That's a nice shoe--Cat's Paw. Cat's Paw shoes and things of that nature, you could take them in that way and relate them to time, your own experience with that particular time, but that is not what I had in mind.

SMITH: But it's inherent in the medium in a way.

WAGNER: Well, if people see it that way, that's fine, but it's still not making a statement.

SMITH: That is, you didn't go down to the Woolworth's and buy all these things--

WAGNER: No, no.

SMITH: --and put these pieces together in the same kind of graphic forms.

WAGNER: No, no. I didn't do any of that.

SMITH: So it's not just the graphic form, it's what the objects are.

WAGNER: Well, each object has it's own energy, you know. Like that old Essex hubcap there between the two wheels--Essex went out of business in the thirties.